

Mirage of Blaze volume 3: The Glass Lullaby

Kuwabara Mizuna

Prologue

Blades gleamed in the darkness.

The dull, metallic sound of swords clashing echoed from the forms of several people locked in combat beneath the light of a naked bulb in a deserted alleyway.

A few were clad in armor, wielding rusted swords. Facing them were two men.

Another flash of blades.

Torn armor fell away, exposing the white bones of a skeleton. A skull glared menacingly from beneath the helmet.

"Dono!"

The younger man thus addressed raised his sword overhead.

His diagonal slash beheaded the skeletal warrior. It stood dully for a moment before unraveling and crumbling soundlessly to the ground.

The youth panted, his eyes alight.

Another of the skeletal warriors was struck down. The older man, clad in a suit, sprinted to the young man's side. Standing back to back, the two men glared at the warriors.

"Kojuurou. Their numbers are too numerous."

"I will get their attention. When an opportunity arises, Dono—"

"Thou wouldst have me flee? Don't say such foolish things." Cold sweat trickled down the young man's brow. "Fleeing from these minions of the Mogami would be a smear on the name of the King of the Oushuu."

"Dono!"

"Kojuurou. We shall break through."

He altered his familiar grip on the sword. The slight tilt of the sword-points of their opponents was a peculiarity stemming from the fact that they could use nothing but their eyes.

Kojuurou also shifted his stance in order to protect his lord. The warriors began to advance. The two sides clashed in furious battle. There were ten—no, twenty of the warriors against the beleaguered two!

A sword pierced Kojuurou's right arm.

"Kojuurou!"

Kicking a warrior away, the young man took Kojuurou's place in the battle. But more of the skeletal warriors advanced, another and another joining the attack. Though deeply wounded, Kojuurou also continued to fight furiously. But they were gradually driven back.

"Dono! Please run now!"

"Don't count me out! I am not running away!"

Just then.

Another voice came from the alleyway.

"Dono—!"

"! ...Shigezane?!"

A number of men fought their way through from behind, cutting a swath through the crowd of skeletal warriors. But one of them had closed upon the young man from the back in his moment of relief.

"! Dono!"

The youth spun reflexively, and the warrior swung his long sword down from overhead.

Fresh blood spouted from his right eye.

"Donooo!!"

Chapter 1: Capital of the Woods, Capital of the Demon

The Northeast-bound No. 107 bullet train to [Sendai](#) departed from [Kooriyama Station](#) .

The train was conspicuously empty—perhaps because it was before noon on

a weekday. Passengers slowly trickled into the compartments with unreserved seating, among them a peculiar male and female party of two

"Oh, are you done eating already?" [Kakizaki Haruie](#) —Kadowaki Ayako—asked, peering at the high school student next to her.

"*You* need to stop gobbling down your food like that,"

Ougi Takaya responded, putting the lid back on his half-finished train station box lunch.

"It's 'cause I didn't have breakfast. And you ate way too little for a growing boy. Are you on a diet or something?"

"Who the hell...!"

"If you're not going to eat it, gimme the lobster?"

Takaya gave up and handed over his boxed lunch wordlessly. Ayako picked at the lobster happily and finished up Takaya's remaining portion as well.

Takaya stared outside.

He had received a phone call from Naoe two days earlier.

"I had mentioned before that I would need you to go to Sendai . That time is now, so please make your preparations."

"Huh?"

"Please take the bullet train to Sendai the day after tomorrow. The appointment is for..."

"Woah, wait a minute here. The day after tomorrow is way too sudden."

"It is sudden, but you have had ample time to prepare. Actually, I would have asked you to come tomorrow if it were possible."

"But I have a final the day after tomorrow!"

"Ah yes, you have school," Naoe said as if it were someone else's problem (though of course it was someone else's problem). "But surely with your usual diligence to your schoolwork, you'll be fine even if you do not take the exam, yes?"

Takaya's shoulders began to shake. *"Guess that sarcasm of yours is the one thing that'll never change."*

"I have no idea what you mean. In any case, your

<<power>> will be needed. We have a prior engagement, so please keep your promise."

"What 'promise', you bastard! I don't remember making any promises! Look!"

"Please don't shout into the phone. Then let us meet in front of Tokyo Station 's Yaesu ticket-examination booth at eleven. All right? Do you

have any

*questions? My parents will frown at me if I'm on the phone too long,
so... Kagetora-sama. It's a long way from [Matsumoto](#) , so please take
care not to be late. I apologize for the bother. Good night."*

"Aaaaaaargh, wait! Damn you, Naoe!!!"

And the line went dead.

Masterfully trapped by Naoe's whirlwind pace, the dazed Takaya dropped his head into his hands.

Only Ayako showed up to meet him at [Tokyo Station](#) .

"Naoe? He just went off to [Yamagata](#) ."

" [Yamagata](#) ?"

"Anyway, here," Ayako said, handing him a three-day-old newspaper that looked like it had been flipped through quite a few times. He skimmed it as they got on the train.

Hotel collapse, cause unknown, [Sendai](#) .

Rebar concrete building collapse, [Sendai](#) .

Continuing the string of mysterious building collapses, this time the collapse of a senior high school gymnasium, [Sendai](#) .

The articles with these headings had been circled with a red pen.

Takaya had also heard of these strange events from somewhere,

probably

the news on TV.

Curiously, buildings in [Sendai](#) were now collapsing suddenly and without warning. A number of people

had already been killed or wounded, and the police and fire departments were becoming increasingly desperate in their investigation. However, the cause had been completely elusive.

Though there were speculations that they were acts of terrorism, the collapses had not been caused by explosions, and the substantial cave-ins at the sites lent credence to the theories of abnormal underground water flow—however, the frequency of the events was as of yet unexplained. And so the people of [the city of Sendai](#) lived in fear, not knowing when or where the next collapse would occur.

This was why Takaya and the others were going to [Sendai](#) . In other words —

"So you guys're thinking that this has something to do with the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#) >>?"

"We can't say for sure, but maybe. After all, [Sendai](#) is the stronghold of the resurrected [Date Masamune](#) . The [onryou](#) of the Date and Mogami have been quite active in that area lately. Frankly, it wouldn't surprise me," Ayako said, frowning.

"So you're saying that [Date Masamune](#) might be causing the building collapses?"

"I wouldn't quite say it like that, but he might certainly be involved somehow.

"We're talking about *that* [Date Masamune](#) ,

right? It's kinda hard to believe the resurrection of someone as famous as him. I mean, there are dramas about him and stuff. Doesn't it feel really, really weird?"

"It is weird. Spirits are. It's unnatural for dead people to remain in this world."

"... That's not what I'm talking about..."

It probably wasn't surprising that Ayako and the others thought about it differently. Well, but they had memories from four hundred years ago. Maybe it was because they had actually known these historical figures from when they'd been alive.

But still, it was just strange to have personages from the history books appearing in the present. Although—

(I guess I'm supposed to be one of those 'personages' too...)

Takaya sighed.

Ayako, finally full, asked while drinking 100-yen tea, "Anyway, Kagetora. Can you use your powers properly now?"

"As well as ever, I guess."

"What? Hasn't Nagahide been giving you special training?"

"Yeah he has, it's thanks to that."

Takaya abruptly turned away with sulky rudeness. [Yasuda Nagahide](#) —

Chiaki Shuuhei—who had made an equivocal appearance before Takaya and the others, was one of the [kanshousha](#) of the Uesugi. It was true that he was giving Takaya training in the use of his <<powers>> every day, but.

"That guy would fit right in in Sparta. Argh, he hits me and kicks me—did he have a grudge against Kagetora or something?!"

"Yeeeah. He's always been a sadist."

"Dammit, it's not like I did anything to him...!"

Takaya's fist shook as he recalled—

"You can't even move this? Did you lose your brains along with your memories? You're a total waste if you can't move this. Did you hear me you moron? A total waste! Move it, you stupid idiot!"

A kick to go with the verbal abuse.

What he called special training was stuff like moving a coin dangling from a string or rolling an empty can—and whether being able to do these things would really develop his <<powers>> was also up for debate.

"That guy totally has a grudge against me or something. Argh, I'll remember this when I can use my <<powers>>, Chiaki!"

"All right, all right. There, there," Ayako soothed him, sipping her tea. "But there'd be no point bringing you if you can't use your <<powers>>. Well, don't worry, when we get to [Sendai](#), we'll get you a proper teacher."

"What?! What do you mean, teacher?"

"Someone recommended by Naoe who he said can help draw out your <<powers>>."

"Urg! You're kidding, right?"

And here he was thinking he'd finally gotten away from Chiaki. He looked up at the ceiling dejectedly.

"Gimme a break, geez."

"If you don't like it, hurry up and get your memories back."

"I'm not Kagetora...!"

"You're so obstinate."

Takaya, looking uncomfortable, dropped his chin into his hands. "Won't Naoe..." he muttered haltingly, "Won't he be coming with us? You said something about [Yamagata](#) ."

"...Yeah." Ayako pulled out the newspaper and looked at Takaya. "Read this article."

"?"

Ayako was pointing to an article on the margin of same page as the [Senda](#) reports. Takaya skimmed it quickly.

"Death of graft suspect due to unnatural causes?"

The article was about a series of corruption cases connected to resort development in [Yamagata](#) .

Bureaucrats at the highest levels of the government had been implicated, but one of those at the center of the bribe scandal had strangely, just a few days earlier, died.

Furthermore, the way in which he had died had been quite out of the ordinary. He had apparently died in his own bed at home, but his body had been covered with hundreds of dog bites.

"Bites?"

"Yeah. And there's something else weird, too. Just a week ago someone else in the graft case died in the same way, bitten to death. It's probably not a coincidence, but...it's weird, isn't it?"

Takaya groaned. Being bitten to death in one's own bed was certainly out of the ordinary.

It could hardly *be* ordinary.

"So their deaths probably have something to do with the <<Yami-Sengoku >>, too?"

"Yeah."

"This graft case?"

"I wouldn't necessarily go that far, but... More like there are probably people related to the graft who also have something to do with the onshou of the <<Yami-Sengoku >>."

"So Naoe went to Yamagata to investigate."

Ayako nodded and began to peel a mandarin orange.

"Mogami Yoshiaki 's in Yamagata Prefecture . And we already have more than enough on our hands with Date Masamune .

Takaya chin sank down lower in his hands as he looked outside the window

"What's wrong? Are you feeling uneasy that Naoe didn't come with us?"

"That's s...!" —tupid, Takaya was going to say, and sighed instead. "That's not it."

"You seem relieved."

"When he's around I just somehow feel like I'm going crazy," Takaya muttered, gazing at the rustic scenery outside. "He—I don't know, he'd put his life on the line for me without a second thought. That's, I mean, that's just so...so...confusing," Takaya finished, and sighed again. A strange expression came over Ayako's face.

"That's natural. That's the reason Naoe is at your side."

"Natural? I couldn't do that even if someone told me to. At least, I..."

He recalled Naoe's words: *"If anything happened to your body, there are people who would grieve."*

Takaya lowered his eyes. "... If there are people who would grieve for me if I died, then of course it's the same for him, right...?"

Ayako was silent for a moment.

"That's true."

"—"

"Actually, Naoe's parents and family are truly very important to him."

"?"

"It's a sort of devotion, if you look at it from the third person. It's always like this. Every time we perform [kanshou](#), our parents and family are always very important to us. In the beginning I wondered why that was."

"..."

"It must be because we feel remorse for stealing the bodies of their true sons or daughters. See? Because even though we change bodies, our

consciousnesses still belong to [Naoe Nobutsuna](#) or [Kakizaki Haruie](#).

So we can't wipe away the feeling that we're fakes." Ayako smiled and

said, "Because we feel guilty, we try to atone for it. Because in

actuality, we're people who died a long time ago. Of course, they would never think that, since we're their sons and daughters...it's too much.

Naoe probably isn't conscious of it himself, but he naturally acts in that way."

Takaya vaguely remembered: *"Don't you think we've thought about that?"*

When had Naoe said that to him?

"So that's why we wonder, why do we continue to perform [kanshou](#) even while thinking these miserable thoughts?—but it really is because

we have a 'mission'. In order to fulfill it, we must do some things

that we can say 'can't be helped'. Naoe's 'mission' is to protect Kagetora—that is, to protect you. So if he doesn't protect you, then he wouldn't be able to justify this foolish long life. That's why—"

He protects me?

A tiny bit of disappointment flashed across his chest.

Of course Naoe protected him because he thought Takaya was 'Kagetora'

If that were not true, he probably wouldn't have risked his life like that even if there would have been people who would have grieved for Takaya. —He wouldn't have, would he?

He protects me because I'm 'Kagetora'.

He protects Kagetora because it's his 'mission'.

To justify himself.

(Is that all it is...?)

Ayako gazed at him with a mouthful of mandarin orange. She said after thinking for a moment, "Well... in its own way, it's complicated for Naoe too."

"... Hatayama...Ranmaru was mouthing off about Naoe the other day, wasn't he?"

"Eh?"

Ayako was visibly flustered. Takaya turned to her.

"He said something about Kagetora being a victim and shame among his comrades. What did he mean by that? Did something happen between Kagetora and Naoe thirty years ago?"

"I guess you can't really ask him, huh?" Ayako made a face. "You probably lost your memories because you didn't want to remember that?"

"Ah...really?"

"Naoe probably wouldn't want you to remember it, either."

"Wh-what the heck? Didn't you just say that you wanted me to hurry up and remember everything? If you tell me, maybe I'll remember something So what happened, anyway?"

"Ah...mmm..." Ayako gave Takaya a sour sideways glance. "Well, because things got really ugly between the two of you back then."

"Ugly? Between Kagetora and Naoe?"

"Yeah. Oda concentrated his attacks especially around you, and misery was putting it lightly. But though you made a show of strength—"Never say die", "I'm fine" and whatnot in front of me, I think you really were crumbling inside. It looked like you really wanted to let go of everything...and many times I think you told only Naoe about what you were truly feeling."

Takaya stared at Ayako intently.

"But from Naoe's standpoint, like I said before, he couldn't let you run from

the 'mission'. It would have made the misery of **kanshou** and existing until now meaningless. No matter how much Kagetora wanted to capitulate, Naoe hardened his heart against it and brushed it off."

"..."

"But I guess Naoe was pressed by the violence of the battle too, and overdid it. He began to forcibly push Kagetora along. Kagetora was more and more worn out, and the battle against Oda was a bog... Wounded again and again with no place to run, tortured and embittered, you began to hate Naoe, who would not let you escape."

Ayako sighed deeply.

"In the end, to put it plainly, it looked like you hated Naoe more than Oda. And yet, even yet, Naoe was still the person Kagetora trusted at the last. So, though you hated Naoe from the bottom of your heart, you entrusted to him, to the one upon whom you relied more than any other, the person who was more important to you than any other...and Naoe—"

Ayako suddenly trailed off. Takaya's eyes widened slightly at her expression.

"Hey **Nee-san** ?"

"Do you remember the name 'Kitazato Minako'?"

Takaya looked back at her with wide, blank eyes.

"'Kitazato Minako'?"

It didn't sound familiar at all.

Ayako resolutely opened her mouth, but hesitated and finally concluded haltingly, "I think I should ask, after all...if Naoe says that I can tell you, then I'll tell you."

Takaya shut his mouth.

Kitazato Minako—

Ayako abruptly gave a false laugh.

"Ahah. Ahahah. Naaah, don't mind me. Let's stop talking about all this gloomy stuff. Hmmm—...Oh, right, how's that good friend of yours, that cute kid? How's he doing?"

"Yuzuru? He's fine, but what... Ah?" At the mention of Yuzuru's name, Takaya remembered something. "That's right, that bastard Ranmaru said something about Yuzuru, didn't he? What did he say—that Yuzuru's a jewel that he's gonna take? What the hell did he mean by that?! I don't understand it at all."

As she'd thought, the mention of Yuzuru immediately caught Takaya's attention. But this was the one thing that he wanted Ayako to tell him.

"Avoid telling Kagetora-sama about Narita Yuzuru as much as you are able."

So Naoe had stabbed a nail into this topic too. Uh-oh, Ayako thought, and shut her mouth.

"You guys know, don't you! Explain it to me!"

"Uh—... aaaactually, we don't know anything. So I don't know."

Takaya scowled at Ayako skeptically.

"It's true, I'm telling you! We have no idea. So I can't give you an answer even if you ask me. So anyway, Kagetora. You should be prepared.

I don't know what's gonna be waiting for us when we arrive in [Sendai](#) , but we are the Uesugi [Yasha-shuu](#) of the [Meikai Uesugi Army](#) . We are representatives of Lord Kenshin, so carry yourself with pride." A scary look entered her eyes. "And no whining."

"... All right." Takaya said, following distant birds flying through the clear sky with his eyes.

(—[Sendai](#) , huh...?)

The bullet train drew closer to [Sendai](#) with every passing mile.

[Miyagi Prefecture](#) , [Sendai City](#) .

This city nicknamed the Capital of Trees, while still holding onto the remains of its tradition as a castle town from the time of the Date Clan, had also developed into the economic and administrative center of the [Northeast](#) and was its largest capital.

July. A line of Zelkova trees stood alongside the row of buildings on Main Street, glowing with the vivid green of early summer.

On the outskirts of [Sendai City](#) .

On a corner of a quiet residential area street was a large, old house with a gate. This area had once held samurai residences, and even now retained many traces of that history. This house appeared to be one of that type. Its sprawling grounds was encircled with a white plaster wall, and situated deep in the inner part of its well-tended garden was a dignified Japanese-style tiled house.

A [shishi odoshi](#) resounded sharply.

The silhouettes of several people moved within the house.

"Well, what a fiasco. That the great [Date Masamune](#) would have his right eye picked out by such piddling, small fry

soldiers," Shigezane taunted his lord. Another youth with a bandage over one eye was seated on the floor beside the thick-eyebrowed and lively-eyed Shigezane. "Still, it was perhaps fortunate that that was the only injury thou received in a place like that. But to lose thy right eye, of all things...!"

The one-eyed young man laughed sardonically. "'Tis evident that that right eye and I are nothing but nodding acquaintances. I never thought that I would become one-eyed again after being revived."

"Perhaps because my lord is the reincarnation of [Holy Priest Mankai](#) ."
Wearing an old-style rolled bandage, the vassal of the Date family,
[Katakura Kojuurou Kagetsuna](#) said. "Perhaps this, too, is the will of
Heaven."

"The will of Heaven...?" The young man's clear left eye darkened. "But
this body does not belong to me. It is inexcusable carelessness towards
the person whose body I've taken.

And for a moment the youth sank into silence.

[Date Masamune](#) .

This young man was the 'One-Eyed Dragon' who had governed [Oushuu](#)
from the [Sengoku](#) to the [Edo Period](#) and built it up to a 620,000-koku
domain, the valiant yet resourceful general and hero of [Sendai](#) , [Date
Masamune](#) .

After death, he had slept in the [Zuihouden](#) and continued to protect [Sendai](#)
as well as the [Oushuu](#) . His soul had been revived because [Mogami
Yoshiaki](#) , who had resurrected into the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#)>>, had invaded
[Sendai](#) . Mogami had begun his invasion with his [onryou](#) in order to add the
Date territories into his own sphere of influence.

Knowing of these plans, Masamune, in order to protect [Sendai](#) from falling
into the hands of his old enemy, his uncle [Mogami Yoshiaki](#) , had returned
via a spiritual vessel.

Several fierce battles had already unfolded with the city of [Sendai](#) as
Mogami sent more and more of his [onryou](#) .



Shigezane snorted with annoyance.

"Those Mogami bastards thought we were away from home, so they'd just come trampling in here and step into our shoes and take our territory.

They look with contempt on the might of the Date," he said roughly over his shoulder. Shigezane was one of the Date Clan who, in their previous lives, had been a

stalwart at Masamune's side since their infancy. Masamune's warriors had also been resurrected with him, and had variously taken possession of the bodies of their blood descendants in order to check Mogami's invasion. "But 'tis aggravation beyond bearing. If we had revived sooner, we would not have let Mogami into our Sendai one single step. But our honorable uncle certainly has it in him. As

usual, he does not seem to be holding back against his cute nephew."

Masamune laughed sardonically and murmured, "Because my honorable

uncle's clan ended with him. His son was completely mediocre, and his 570,000-koku territory was forfeited. The vexation must have been making my uncle

turn over in his grave. So I understand his feelings..." Masamune said, looking out the window. "But we are dead—we cannot do it over again now. We cannot relive the past. Is there no other way but for the dead to fight each other?"

"Really? That's not what I think," Shigezane said, leaning forward.

"Though we're dead, to this degree, to the extent that we are here, we're alive. We can look at it as a chance to fulfill the dreams we had in our lifetimes."

"Wouldst thou support my uncle?"

"I didn't say that. Only that we should look on the good side. Does my lord not think so?"

"..."

Shigezane laughed. "Proof that the 'One-Eyed Dragon' has grown old, too.'

Shigezane looked at Kojuurou.

"And what of thee, Kagetsuna? A general brought back to life after his death to go forth to fulfill his dream of conquering Oushuu —dost thou not understand a little of Mogami's heart?"

"Well. To that—" Kojuurou said with cool eyes. "One's life is lived once. We who stand here are nothing but the husks of what we were. Whether it be regret or anything else of our former lives, all are now

buried with our bones."

Shigezane pouted. "Humph. None of you have any ambition."

"And yet, Shigezane—" Masamune said impassively, folding his arms, "Mogami's army grows rapidly here. We easily drove his warriors back earlier, but now that their numbers have increased, sooner or later 'twill be difficult for us to hold them back. And stranger still, this is [Sendai](#) , the territory of the Date. Even if he should use the spirits here, they should be favorable towards us. Where are Mogami's reinforcements coming from?"

"Dono. They do not belong to Mogami."

"What?"

Shigezane and Masamune turned sharply towards Kojuurou. He looked at them calmly.

"What dost thou mean, Kojuurou?"

"I mean that those ghosts who attacked us earlier were not the troops of Lord Yoshiaki."

"Not Mogami? Then—?"

Kojuurou said in a low voice, "They were warriors of the Ashina."

"! Ashina?!" Masamune involuntarily cried out. "[Ashina Yoshihiro](#) ? Have the Ashina been resurrected as well as the Mogami?"

"Art thou certain, Kojuurou!"

"Perhaps. The crest on their battle flags, armor, sword hilts was that of the Ashina. And also, I recalled that the warriors were wet, as if they had had water poured on them. They were probably the spirits of those who had died by drowning. If you recall that in our previous life, we defeated the Ashina forces at the [Battle of Suriagehara](#) by chasing them into the violent torrents of the river..."

"Were yesterday's warriors from then?"

"Though I cannot say for sure."

Masamune's eyebrows drew together painfully. The Ashina had once, along with the Mogami and Satake, been strong rivals with whom he had fought many fierce battles for control of the [Northeast](#). Many had met their ruin at the hands of Masamune in such battles as the [Battle of Hitotoribashi](#) and the [Battle of Suriagehara](#).

So this was what it meant to be resurrected.

"The Ashina resent their defeat by the Date Clan. If they have been revived, then revenge against us would inevitably be first on their agenda."

"We would almost certainly be at a greater disadvantage from their blunders than the Mogami..." Shigezane also chimed in.

Masamune pondered in still silence, his one eye narrowed. "This will not do. The Date's forces are too weak. Our main troops have their hands full even now with the extermination of the [onryou](#) within the city. If

we should be attacked by fresh troops here..."

Their fighting strength, spread too thin even now, would be further scattered. Mogami in the west, Ashina in the south. A perfect scenario for a pincer attack.

"Dono. Let us call upon the spirits of [Shiroishi](#) . It will allow us to hold the Ashina back from advancing further north, and fortify the south."

"But do we have enough time?"

"I know not. Still, the news of the breach of the fortress in [Aizu](#) has not yet spread. Ashina's main force will likely not move for the time being. If we move now, perhaps..."

"... Those spirits who died in battle cannot rest even though they are dead, can they?" Masamune murmured, and abruptly raised his head.
"We

have no choice. Kojuurou, I give thee command of [Shiroishi](#) . Summon the spirits there."

Shigezane interjected immediately. "What do we do about Mogami? If they knew about the resurrection of the Ashina, they would take the opportunity to attack."

"Shigemoto and the others are there. We should summon the spirits of the north as well."

"Dost thou plan to raise yet more spirits? The fighting will spread.

The fortress in the north is engaged in battle with the Nanbu Clan. We cannot move further!"

"Aah," Masasume groaned painfully, when—

Someone called from the direction of the paper sliding door. Kojuurou responded and stood. He stepped out, and after a moment returned to report.

"Dono, it appears that thou hast a guest."

"A guest? Mine?"

"Yes."

"Who is it?"

Kojuurou, his wise eyes alighting, replied steadily, with care: "One belonging to the Takeda."

"What?" Masamune's left eye narrowed in surprise. "Takeda? That's...but, could it be—"

"He hath expressed a desire to discuss something with thee directly. Shall allow him in?"

Masamune and Shigezane exchanged a glance. Their lips tightened.

Masamune asked Kojuurou guardedly, "Who is this person from the Takeda?"

"It is," Kojuurou responded with cool composure, "[Kousaka Danjou Masanobu](#)."

Chapter 2: Invocation of the Dead

The dry *crack* of the [shishi odoshi](#) echoed within the garden.

Masamune, as master of the house, sat with his back towards the alcove. Shigezane and Kojuurou were seated at his side to receive this completely unexpected guest, a man whom they had never met in their previous lives. Their gazes were steadily concentrated on the beautiful young man with jet-black hair being shown into the south guest room facing the garden.

"This is the first time that I have had the honor of meeting thee, most noble lord of the Date. I am the vassal of Takeda of [Koushuu](#) , [Kousaka Masanobu](#) .

I have come to call upon thee at Lord Shingen's bidding," Kousaka said in a clear, carrying voice, and quietly raised his eyes. Translucent skin and full red lips.

Kousaka continued, his straight gaze focused on Masamune, "It is my great honor and delight to sit in audience with the celebrated Lord [Date Masamune](#) , the 'One-Eyed Dragon of the [Oushuu](#) '."

"And thou art [Kousaka Danjou](#) -dono? I, too, have heard much of thee. The [Koushuu](#) book of military strategy, '[Kouyou Gunkan](#) ', was thy work, was it not? 'Twas in my previous life that I had the pleasure of reading it, but I admired it greatly."

"Thy praise humbles me. In my previous life as a vassal of the Takeda, I would never have dreamed of being able to meet thee in this way."

And then Masamune's one clear eye glittered sharply.

"And I have heard of the resurrection of that great general, Lord [Takeda Shingen](#) . I am certain that the generals of the various domains are quivering in their boots?"

"That is perhaps so." Kousaka spoke with only slightly more force. "We the Takeda are now sending our troops into [Echigo](#) ([Niigata Prefecture](#)) from the northern [Kantou](#) ."

"[Echigo](#) ? Hmm... That was... I had thought that to be the territory under the influence of Lord Kenshin."

"Lord Kenshin has not entered into the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#) >>. Nor has Lord Kagekatsu—" A secret smile curved Kousaka's lips. "Perhaps they will not be resurrected."

"Why dost thou thus believe?"

"They were purified many years ago. Their spirits no longer remain in this world."

"I see. So Lord Kagekatsu has left..."

[Uesugi Kagekatsu](#) (who was also Kagetora's younger brother-in-law) had been, as one of the three great powers of the [Kantou](#) in [Toyotomi](#) 's Japan a formidable enemy of the Mogami and Date. If he had been resurrected, he would without question have been the biggest threat to the Date.

Kousaka continued without giving any hint of whether or not he knew Masamune's inner thoughts.

"We the Takeda are old friends of Uesugi-dono. If our Lord Shingen should govern Echigo , I am certain that Lord Kenshin's mind be at peace as well."

Masamune glared at that.

"Humm. So Takeda-dono wishes to be Lord Kenshin's proxy?"

"Yes, indeed. However, there are those who would hinder us in this."

"?"

"The general called Mogami Yoshiaki . He is seeking to extend his reach into Echigo as well."

"!"

Masamune's single eye narrowed, and Shigezane and Kojuurou drew in an involuntary breath. —Kousaka quietly noted their reactions.

"He is certainly a rather troublesome commander, is he not? Fitting of the name 'The Heroic Stallion of Dewa '.

It has been a headache for Lord Shingen. And of a certainty, for Lord Date as well, whose troops have crossed blades with him often."

"..."

Masamune responded in a low voice, "Mogami Yoshiaki , my uncle, has always—"

"Been a painful experience?"

Shigezane checked himself from unconsciously leaning forward.
Masamune

gave Kousaka a sharp look. Kousaka's lips curved into his usual faint smile.

"In this <<Yami-Sengoku >>, Lord Mogami's aim seems to be the conquest of the entire Northeast . In actuality, he appears to have already launched an intense offensive against Sendai . Objectively-speaking, Mogami's military strength is overwhelming. It will only be a matter of time before the territory of Sendai collapses and falls into his hands."

"What?!"

"Lord Date, please be calm," Kousaka said. And then: "Wouldst thou not destroy him?"

"!"

Masamune took in a sharp breath. Kousaka gazed at him fixedly.

"Our Echigo is also being threatened by Mogami's vigorously movements. Yes. Just as Sendai is. Mogami is equally a menace to both sides."

"Thou art saying that we should join together?"

"It would benefit the Date as well as the Takeda if Mogami were gone.

It would be an easy matter if the East and the West were in agreement.

We could destroy him in a pincer movement."

A grin floated upon Kousaka's lips.

"Certainly, an alliance would mean that we could come to thine aid in other matters as well. For instance—"

"?"

"The other difficulty which has been causing some trouble for Lord Date. The resurrection of Ashina."

Masamune reacted as if he had been struck.

"I have heard it said that the Ashina troops are quite daring. They have advanced from the south, and have made it such that Lord Date has not been able to do battle with the Mogami at his ease. We can send assistance from [Kouduke \(Gunma Prefecture\)](#); the Takeda can hold their attention from the Northern [Kantou](#)."

"...!"

"What sayst thee, Lord Date?"

Masamune drew in a tense, involuntary breath.

An offer all unsought.

And yet, he could not make an immediate reply—because the one he was dealing with was [Takeda Shingen](#), who had once been called the strongest of the [Sengoku](#).

In actuality, Shingen had subdued the Northern [Kantou](#) no more than two months ago and had only the barest margin of reinforcements. With only these forces, Shingen was probably no threat to speak of for Mogami. In any case, if Mogami could be cleverly done away with, then perhaps soon enough—

(Does Shingen himself not have aspirations over control of the

Northeast...?)

That would probably be his true purpose.

Both Shigezane and Kojuurou probably also felt the same misgivings.

Saying nothing, they watched Masamune's tight-lipped expression attentively. Masamune sat motionless. Kousaka gazed at him for a little while. Then—

"Well—we ask not for an immediate answer," he said coolly. "I shall wait a few days for thy reply. Please think upon it with care. I shall return for thy response some days hence."

"Wilt thou be making thy way home?"

"I shall stay for the moment in [Sendai](#) .

Whenever thou hast made thy decision, please call upon me," Kousaka said, and stood. Kojuurou had stood as well to see him out when Kousaka

suddenly turned to Masamune as if he had just remembered something.

"There is one note of import which I had forgotten to mention."

"?"

"According to a report from one of our <<[nue](#)>> who had infiltrated the Mogami—Lord Date, it seems somehow that thy lady mother and thy brother are with Mogami."

"!"

All present inhaled sharply.

"Mother and Kojirou!"

"Since Lady Ohigashi-no-Kata is also Lord Mogami's younger sister—it is said that the second son of the Date, Kojirou -dono, has chosen Mogami-dono out of all the <<Yami-Sengoku >> as his protector. It must surely be the designs of the 'Demon Princess of Ouu'.

Masamune was startled.

"Could it be that Kojirou and Mother have..."

"Art thou certain, Kousaka-dono?"

Kousaka looked at Kojirou and nodded.

"Yes. In his previous life, he was put to death by Lord Date himself on suspicion of treason. His bitterness must run deep precisely because he was Lord Date's own younger brother."

"...!"

"I am certain that Lord Date would not wish to kill his mother, as well as his brother a second time. If the Date should ally itself with us, we would venture to undertake all of these unpleasant duties." Kousaka smiled charmingly. "I await thy—favorable response."

And with these parting words, Kousaka disappeared out of the paper sliding doors.

Masamune couldn't find his voice. He stared after Kousaka, speechless.

(Could it really be that...)

Masamune's fists shook slightly.

(Mother—...)

The storefronts and houses of [Sendai City](#) spread out beyond [Hirose River](#) .

After leaving Masamune's mansion, Kousaka went to the viewing platform at [Aoba Castle](#) . This place, with its statue of [Date Masamune](#) on his horse, was a famous sight-seeing spot. There were many tourist groups bustling about, but when the organizations left, the platform was suddenly quiet.

A single crow came flying towards him from the east.

Kousaka held out his arm.

The crow landed on Kousaka's hand, flapping its wings. It opened its beak and cawed several times.

"What?" Kousaka's eyes opened wide. "Kagetora has entered [Sendai](#) ?"

The crow shrieked hoarsely and flapped its wings. Kousaka was silent for a moment before finally smiling faintly.

"I see. So Kagetora's finally come. Those damn [Yasha-shuu](#) of Kenshin's are really beginning to go all-out in their attempt to crush the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#) >>,"

Kousaka muttered to himself, stroking the crow's beautiful glossy black

head and throat. "If that is what you plan to do, Kagetora, then I will certainly not hold back. Be prepared to put your life on the line."

With a "good work", Kousaka released the crow skyward. The crow took off, its black wings flapping against clear summer skies.

The wind rustled through the boughs.

Kousaka's usual enigmatic, charming smile suddenly disappeared like a mask being taken off.

"To fight Oda, Kagetora must regain his memories. —Forgive me, Naoe."

Kousaka turned on his heels.

The pigeons at his feet simultaneously took wing.

"Hey, Nee-san , you okay or what?"

Takaya's voice came from the long pedestrian platform in front of Sendai Station .

Ayako had been feeling unwell since they'd gotten off at the station.

As they walked along, her face gradually turned so pale that even Takaya was worried.

"I'm fine, I'm fine. I'll get used to it if I can rest for a bit,"

Ayako said, waving her hand, and sat down on a nearby bench. "But what is with this aura? What the heck happened to this city?"

"Is it really that bad?"

"Lucky you. You must be unconsciously shutting it out," Ayako groaned, pressing a hand against her head. "It's not normal. This city's <<mood>> is creating bad wavelengths. I wonder if it's always been like this."

"? Does it have anything to do with spirits?"

"Probably. Spirits filled with <<malice>> create strange wavelengths. But this is weird. It's like there's a excessive amount of unpleasant feelings here..."

"Are you really okay?"

"Yeah... Oh—we need to get to Naoe's acquaintance's temple from here. We'll be staying there."

Yeeargh! Takaya's eyes narrowed.

"Temple! You're gonna make me stay at a temple?"

"Yup. 'Cause they're free."

Takaya looked up at the clear sky dejectedly.

He had a bad feeling about this...

Even a sleeping tiger could still sense that much.

After about fifteen minutes by taxi. The temple was located in the

suburbs a little ways away from the town areas. On its door was a nameplate declaring it to be the 'Shingon-shuu Jikou Temple'.

Takaya looked around at the grounds, which were completely paved with gravel.

"Haaaaah..."

"Hey, hey. Over here, bro."

They walked towards the entrance of the charming temple office, and happened upon a person of short stature in working robes who appeared to be the head priest. He came towards them carrying a bamboo broom.

"Oh!" Ayako said softly.

"Good afternoon. How have you been?"

"Ah. It has been a while."

The abbot, who seemed about seventy and remarkably sprightly for his age, headed towards them. He appeared to already be acquainted with Ayako.

"You must be tired after such a long journey. For now, please come in."

"Thank you so much for your help."

Contrary to Ayako, who seemed on her best behavior, Takaya, as usual, showed no hint of a smile. The abbot seemed to notice him just then.

"Aha..."

The priest's eyes suddenly twinkled. For some reason, Takaya had the bad habit of glaring at people upon first meeting them, so he usually made a bad first impression—and even now he was glaring at the abbot with all the ferocity of a stray dog.

"So you are the one that Yoshiaki told me about."

"Hey, hey, Kagetora...!"

Ayako forcibly pushed his head down.

"Ow! What the hell!"

"He's helping us, so give a proper greeting! And mind your manners!"

Takaya reluctantly bowed his head in apology. But his eyes didn't leave the priest. The abbot somehow seemed to admire his rebelliousness.

"An expression that would benefit from some tempering."

Ayako hastily said, "I-I'm really sorry. He doesn't know any manners—hey, Kagetora! This person is the abbot of this temple, Kokuryou-san. Say 'nice to meet you!'"

"Oh, stop nagging me already!"

"What did you say?!"

Kokuryou laughed heartily.

"It's fine, it's fine. Please come in. This way. Have you had lunch? Allow me to serve you some tea."

"Okay..."

Ayako scowled at Takaya with reproach.

Ayako and Takaya stepped inside. Many calendars and paper lanterns hung from the walls in the [tatami](#) -matted living room. Strangely, the sense of life here made Takaya feel all the more inexperienced.

"Why are you fawning all over him? It's disgusting."

"You don't know this, but Kokuryou-san is a really stubborn person, and he's totally scary when he gets mad."

(Stubborn and scary, huh...?)

Feh, he thought, putting on a bored expression.

From what he'd heard of this Kokuryou, he was an old acquaintance of the Tachibanas, Naoe's current family, whose temple was of the same school. Consequently, he was one of [Naoe Nobutsuna](#) —Tachibana Yoshiaki's—longtime friends, and seemed to know something of his true being.

He had also assisted Ayako once, two years ago, in her work of [onryou](#) extermination.

(This is all kinda depressing...)

Takaya scowled.

The paper door slid open, and Kokuryou appeared.

"I've left your luggage in your rooms. Please rest for a little while.

Going out on the town afterwards would not be too late."

Ayako bowed her head deeply over the barley tea. Kokuryou chuckled and sat down in front of them.

"Young monk, what is your name?"

"*You're* the monk, Gramps." Takaya's eyebrows drew together in annoyance.

"Hmm. True enough. But neither am I 'Gramps'. My name is 'Kokuryou Keinosuke'. And yours?"

"... Ougi Takaya."

"I see." Kokuryou chuckled with increased amusement. "You have a wonderful name."

Takaya's eyebrows had been twitching since earlier. He was more sensitive than most people to someone making fun of or making a fool of him. But Kokuryou didn't even seem to be doing it deliberately.

"I have heard about you from Yoshiaki. You show promise. You have that twist of expression that says that something which is polished will shine. Hahahah!"

Ayako's entire face stiffened, caught again between Kokuryou with his hearty laugh and Takaya with his quivering fists.

"Er, um...anyway." She hurriedly inserted herself between the two. "What is...what is the situation in [Sendai](#) like right now? Is there really some sort of disaster or something taking place?"

"Hmm. So it would seem." Kokuryou stopped laughing and quietly folded his arms. "The <<mood>> of the earth has changed. I have lived here for all of my life, but the <<mood>> of the earth has completely changed these past few months."

"Changed? How so?"

"It's as if something about the distribution of its density has changed. Did you not sense it when you entered the city?"

The two of them exchanged a look.

"I'm not really sure, but..."

Takaya asked, eyes intense, "Does it have anything to do with the guys who're destroying the buildings?"

"The cases of building collapses? I went to see for myself as well, and it was dreadful. The buildings and the gymnasium were completely destroyed, and there was a crater in the ground as if from an air-raid."

"__"

"The timing coincides. It did happen from around that time, so there probably is a connection."

Takaya's eyes quietly narrowed to slits.

"Who do you think is doing it?"

"I do not know. However, I have heard many reports of people seeing armored warriors walking around the streets of [Sendai](#) recently."

"! Armored warriors?"

"In my business one will hear of these things. There are both skeletal and living warriors, and their numbers have swelled rapidly around these parts."

Takaya chewed his bottom lip lightly. —It was the same as that time in [Matsumoto](#) .

"Well, no doubt it would be better for you to see for yourselves. You should do a careful [spiritual sensing](#) . Especially Ayako-san. You would certainly understand the situation better than I."

"Okaaaay..."

Kokuryou smiled, looking at the mystified Takaya.

"Though I'm a senile old man, I can still sense auras slightly. I am also somewhat familiar with your powers. ...Ah, yes. There was something that Yoshiaki had asked of me."

"?"

Naoe...?

"Dear me, and it was such an important favor, too. He asked me to give you training to draw out your powers, of which I have heard you have an earth-shattering amount. It would appear that you have become my first priority."

"Ack! So then my 'teacher' is supposed to be—"

Takaya's head drooped sharply as Kokuryou nodded gleefully.

(So this is what they call an ominous premonition...)

"With what amounts to Yoshiaki's metaphorical seal of approval, I will enjoy being your teacher no matter what sort of strange creature we end up with. So please prepare yourself. We old folks like disciplining young people, you see. What I will give you is training of the 'soul'. I will not go easy on you."

"You-you've gotta be kidding me!"

"No, no, it will be fun! Hahahah!"

Ayako convulsively joined Kokuryou's hearty laugh, but her gaze at Takaya was also compassionate.

Takaya already wanted to go home.

"Youngling, you should call me 'Master' from now on."

(I-I feel dizzy...)

His first day in [Sendai](#) was already bubbling over with trouble.

Near evening, they headed for the [Sendai](#) streets in order to perform a [spiritual sensing](#) immediately. The first building which had crumbled had been the Business Hotel in Miya Town , and though none of its guests had

been hurt because it had happened around noon, its employees were much distressed.

"This is terrible..." Takaya muttered unthinkingly.

The place was encircled with no-entry tape, exposing the remains of the building which had been so atrociously reduced to rubble. And yet the surrounding buildings and residences were untouched by the disaster; the sight of this one collapsed building was horrifyingly unnatural.

"But it's totally untouched—it's been two weeks, hasn't it? Haven't they finished the investigation yet?"

"Not yet, I think."

"Not yet?"

Ayako nodded, an extremely serious expression on her face.

"I've heard that they haven't made any progress on the investigation, that anyone who enters will get a terrible headache that could get bad enough to make people faint. It seems like—" She shook the tape.

"—someone's erected a barrier here. It's a strange feeling, isn't it?"

"—"

Takaya looked inside the tape.

It was true the scene was strangely ominous. Perhaps due to the darkness now that night had fallen, the ashen shadows of the ruins grew more and more gloomy.

Cicadas called.



Ayako suddenly glared at something.

"Kagetora!"

Her gaze was directed towards the mountain of rubble. Pale fire floated above the mass of dark concrete.

(...A will-o'-the-wisp...)

As soon as they focused on it, the pale fire began to divide and multiply. Some of them drifted to the circumference of the rubble, trailing streams of faint light.

There was the feeling of something gathering.

A lukewarm wind slipped softly between them. No, not wind. The auras of

many people. Chills crawling down his back, Takaya turned back to the rubble and unconsciously gulped down a breath.

An countless number of spirits had assembled there.

Like moths to the flame these ghosts had gathered in this one place.

People who were soaking wet, people who dragged their crumbled bodies along the ground, decapitated people, babies, samurai, farmers, people already turned into featureless skeletons... There were hundreds of them here, all sorts of ghosts who seemed to have been drawn to gather in the heart of these ruins.

"Wh...!"

Takaya froze and Ayako went on guard.

The assembled ghosts suddenly noticed them and turned. All of their faces were twisted with hatred.

"Oh shit! They're going to attack!"

"What?!"

The spirits attacked without even giving him time to protect himself, their hatred naked. Ayako instantly joined her hands.

"Ari nari tonari anaro nabi kunabi !"

The attacking onryou !

bai!

At her shout the air split apart and sucked the ghosts inside.

At the same time the ghosts all simultaneously turned their repulsive gazes towards them.

"Oh, oh shit! **Nee-san** , watch out!"

"Shut up and give me a hand here!"

"Ack, behind you!"

Spinning, Ayako pointed her joined hands.

"bai!"

The spirit pressing up behind her disappeared.

"Guess you're weaker than I thought."

"This isn't the time for insults! Wah!"

The next spirit and the next attacked. Waving hoes, the farmer-like spirits advanced on Takaya.

"Kagetora, <<**choubuku** >>!"

"I told you I can't! Over there!"

A hoe grazed his flank. The **onryou** came at Takaya with naked malice and the intent to kill. Takaya was too occupied to even think about **choubuku** , and Ayako clicked her tongue in disgust.

"You're useless!"

"bai!"

All of the **onryou** attacking Takaya disappeared in an instant.

But even so they weren't giving up. The assembled spirits appeared to regard them as their enemy. In solidarity, they coalesced into an enormous spherical mass of souls. This battle strategy relied on sheer force of numbers to allow even the individual weak spirits to bring a terrible energy to bear.

They were in trouble.

"We're gonna get crushed to a pulp if we go up against that!"

Ayako's face twisted with strain.

"bai!"

At the sound of her voice, countless spirits flew off in all directions from the lump like fireworks.

(Did they escape?!)

Spirits were fleeing from Ayako's bind. Ayako's <<power>> was apparently not enough to keep all of them bound. She could barely keep the binding on a portion of the spirits—no help for it!

Clicking her tongue, she began to chant.

"**Noumakusamanda bodanan baishiramendaya sowaka !**"

Hands joined in **Bishamonten** 's ritual gesture, she cried to heaven: "**Namu**

Tobatsu Bishamonten !"

Light glowed from her fists.

"For this demon subjugation, lend me thy power!"

She tore her hands forcefully apart in front of her chest.

"<<Choubuku >>!"

Light surged from Ayako's hands. An intense flare tore into the spirits and enveloped them. What terrible screams!

"!"

Takaya covered his eyes with his hands. A blinding white light.

He waited for it to fade away before finally opening his eyes.

Silence returned once more.

"That's just as bizarre as ever."

"What are you talking about? If this is bizarre, then what about your [kekai-choubuku](#) ?"

Takaya's head drooped suddenly. He had clean forgotten.

"Sheesh, you didn't even give me a hand. About half of them escaped because you didn't help me. I'm gonna have to tell Naoe about it."

"I can't help you if I don't remember how. And besides, what the hell were those ghosts? What happened?"

Ayako looked at the mountain of rubble gravely.

"It appears that someone performed an invocation of the dead here."

"Invocation of the dead?"

"It's used to summon spirits. Like a sort of magnet, I guess. It looks like someone performed a spell in these premises to draw spirits here. I think that until the spell dissipates, the spirits who escaped will probably gather here again."

Takaya frowned doubtfully.

"So does this have anything to do with the buildings collapsing? Could someone have destroyed the building to perform this invocation of the dead or something?"

"Hmm. I'm not sure yet. But if the same thing is happening at the other sites —"

But.

Who and why?

Takaya's eyes quietly narrowed to long slits as he gazed at the crumbled, forlorn ruins.

"So we should check up on it and see?"

"Right. But..."

And Ayako looked up at him maliciously.

"You've gotta be able to use your <<powers>> first. Like what happened just now—I don't have time to protect you."

Takaya brushed back his hair, somewhat ashamed.

In the [Sendai](#) streets, brilliant neon lights glowed to life.

Chapter 3: Moss Rose

In any case, they would not be able to make a move unless they figured out what was going on. So Ayako began a detailed *reisa* within the city the very next day.

Takaya, on the other hand, commenced training to develop his <<powers>> under the guidance of Abbot Kokuryou.

A training which turned out to be pretty much all discipline.

He'd been forced to get up at an ungodly hour and sweep the garden and main temple buildings, then impelled to attend morning services after a rushed breakfast without even a 'if you please'. And only when he'd been bullied around so much that he had gone past sullenness to mute astonishment did Kokuryou finally face him seriously.

Seated formally in front of the incense altar, Takaya turned to Kokuryou.

"You see, your edginess means that you do not have the necessary calm. It hardens your heart, and what must come out of you is trapped inside," Kokuryou explained, and reached out to rub Takaya's shoulder rigorously with his right hand. "If you shoulder such anger every day, then you will be wasting much of your precious power. The first thing you must do is relax. Prepare your mind to accept all things freely."

"__"

"All this talk of will-power or supernatural power is very much

exaggerated; in reality, all of them arise from the subtlety of your soul. If you should understand the subtlety of all things, if you should become subtle, you would possess it naturally. It is a conversation you have with your own small universe by opening your narrow heart. The obstinacy of your mind as it is now will always keep you from mastery."

Kokuryou sighed, seeing Takaya's annoyance at the incomprehensible words. Then his expression softened.

"Ah well, here, you will understand," he said, and stood. When he returned, he had something like a scroll in his hand.

"First, calm yourself and relax your mind. Now cross your feet, like this," Kokuryou said, showing Takaya the lotus position. Takaya imitated him. "Good. What we are going to do next is one of the methods of [Kanhou](#) , a way to remove all the scattered distractions from your mind by counting your breaths. It is called [Susokukan](#) .

Besides concentrating your mind, it prepares you to converse with your universe. What you need to do is to count from one to ten, one for every breath you take. When you reach ten, start over again from one. Now—" Kokuryou showed him the unfurled scroll. "It is essential that you contemplate the [Aun](#) characters in your mind. When you exhale, imagine the 'a ' character; when you inhale, imagine the 'un ' character. Namely, these symbols.

Huge a and un Sanskrit characters were drawn on the scroll.

"[Aun](#) is pronounced 'a' and 'n'. 'A ' is the sound that comes from your mouth when you open it, 'un ' "

is the sound that comes from your mouth when you close it; essentially, these two characters encompass all of existence from beginning to end—in other words, they express everything. The [Niou](#) guardians at the door of this temple have their mouths set in the shape of '[a](#)' and '[un](#)'."

"Okaaay..."

"When you breathe, draw these two characters in your mind. As you do, clear away your idle thoughts and stabilize your consciousness. When you are able to do this, you come to the second level. Kokuryou's finger glided to the '[a](#)' character. "Next is [Ajikan](#) , a type of meditation. Visualize '[a](#)' within the circle of the full moon, and perceive that you are one with [Dainichi Nyorai](#) —this is one of the truth-seeking methods explained in the [Mahavairocana Sutra](#) ."

"One with [Dainichi Nyorai](#) ...?"

"[Dainichi Nyorai](#) is the buddha at the origin of the cosmos, and this '[a](#)' is the character that symbolizes him. When you view this character, you see the origin of the cosmos—and the foundations of your own microcosm.

It naturally holds the power to equalize the flow of blood to every part of your body—that is, it allows you to sense the flow of the unified might of your body and mind when they become one." Kokuryou smiled slightly. "Continue to repeat until you can control this flow at will. The actualization of your power will also depend on this."

Takaya was half believing, half dubious, but—

Kokuryou pushed his back straight.

"Good. Now concentrate your mind. Begin by counting your breaths. Visualize 'a ' and 'un '. All right? Please close your eyes."

Takaya memorized the Sanskrit characters from the scroll and closed his eyes as he had been instructed.

"Relax. Breathe naturally. When you breathe out, picture 'a '. When you breathe in, picture 'un '. Count your breaths—yes, just let it flow naturally—'

With his breaths he drew 'aun ' in his mind.

a—

un—

"Drawing it alone is not enough. You must contemplate it. 'Breathing'—in other words, 'aun '. See it in your mind."

Three—.

Four—.

Kokuryou silently watched over Takaya. It would not be easy to enter that state for the first time.

And Takaya certainly wasn't particularly used to doing as he'd been told. Because he had to hold those images in his mind, his breathing and meditation remained unsynchronized; rather than relaxing, his shoulders were obviously tensing even further. He was also having a hard time concentrating when he could feel Kokuryou's eyes on him.

(Why the hell do I have to do this?) he thought half-angrily, but with

Kokuryou watching him, he couldn't just stop. He had virtually no intention of putting serious effort into it—but since he had no other choice, Takaya continued to count, his mind a tangle.

And yet—

After about twelve minutes, something began to change.

(Oh...?) Kokuryou sensed it. (This...)

Takaya himself didn't notice this transformation. No—he had naturally begun slipping into a meditative state, and *couldn't* notice it.

At each repetition of the count cycle, his breathing and [aun](#) visualization naturally meshed, and they smoothly flowed together before he was even consciously aware of it.

Perhaps Takaya's consciousness was now entirely focused inward—that sharp tension of his habitual constant vigilance against the external world had disappeared from around him.

(This is amazing...) Kokuryou sighed deeply in admiration. (What splendid concentration.)

There was not even a thread of disturbance in the air surrounding Takaya.

The restlessness in his posture had completely disappeared as soon as he had entered into meditation.

Kokuryou rolled his tongue in thought. That he had achieved this much in such a short time, in his first time at this meditation method—his

talents were truly out of the ordinary.

(Yoshiaki has certainly entrusted a hell of a youngster into my care.)

Would drawing out his powers also take less time than expected?

As these thoughts went through Kokuryou's mind —

Takaya's shoulders twitched slightly.

His rhythm suddenly went wild.

(?)

Strain entered into his breathing and [aun](#) visualization. He immediately attempted to rally, but evidently he

could no longer naturally reenter the meditative state once disturbed.

Kokuryou peered at Takaya quizzically.

"Young monk...?"

Takaya finally opened his eyes at the sound of Kokuryou's voice. He sighed deeply.

"Is anything wrong?"

"Ah...no." Takaya's expression was slightly agitated. "Just now, something..."

"Something...? What is it?"

Takaya closed his mouth. He couldn't express it clearly. No, though he could not remember anything but the image of it, he had felt something

in himself interfering with his ability to enter into deep meditation.

Or would it be better said that something had pushed him away from coming any closer to the core of himself...?

It was inconceivable for Takaya that this might be the wall of suggestion Kagetora—in other words, his former self—had built. This wall erected by the ruins of Kagetora's consciousness to seal his memories from resurrection manifested as a minor headache for Takaya.

"Shall we try once more?"

"Huh? ...Ah, okay..."

He made a valiant effort, but this time it didn't go so smoothly. No matter how many breaths he counted, his mind would go off somewhere before he could catch himself.

Kokuryou left the main temple building.

Takaya continued to count.

But as the minutes passed, his mind wandered away before he knew it.

"*Sendai* ...?" His younger sister Miya's eyes widened to hear his plans, the day before he left. "*Onii-chan* , you're going to *Sendai* ?"

"Yeah..." Takaya responded guiltily. "*I'm going on a trip with some friends...probably to somewhere in Miyagi* ."

"*Hmm, that's really sudden, isn't it?*" Miya made a strange face, but after a

moment suddenly smiled brightly. *"You'll probably see Mom, right? If you do, will you tell her that we're doing well?"*

"Ah...yeah." Takaya nodded, baffled, but...

Takaya left the main temple building and looked up at Sendai 's pure blue sky from the garden.

He was still thinking of that smile Miya had given him.

(It doesn't really matter anymore, does it?)

Scenes from the past flickered into his mind.

It'd been five years ago. His family had been a storm every day: his father in a drunken frenzy, his mother trying desperately to stop him. Fighting and violence. It seemed like his younger self watched his mother crying in her room every day.

Carrying a small luggage bag, their mother had walked away from them.

She had turned countless times, relief at being able to escape on her face. And at the same time, deep apology for leaving her children. All the while, Takaya had stood in the cold wind gazing after her thin figure disappearing into the twilight of the hill road.

Their mother had later remarried, and was now living here in Sendai .

"Tell her that we're doing well."

(I won't see her, Miya,) Takaya told his sister in faraway Matsumoto .

(There's no way I'll see her...)

Takaya's eyes dropped slightly.

They were under the same sky.

But she no longer had any connection to him.

(She's a stranger now...)

He sighed a little and gazed up at the blue [Sendai](#) sky once more.

From the main temple building Kokuryou watched over Takaya's still figure.

Ayako returned around seven that evening.

After finishing a dinner prepared by the temple, Ayako reported the results of the [spiritual sensing](#) to Kokuryou.

"Rituals for [invocations of the dead](#) were performed at the other two locations as well, as we suspected.

There were spirits swarming all over them. It's now somewhat clear that these incidents of building collapses were done for the invocation ritual."

"Is that so?" Kokuryou sipped his tea slowly. "So you're saying that it was necessary to destroy the buildings at those sites to perform the [invocation of the dead](#) ?"

"Yes. But we still don't know the significance of those three places. There don't appear to be any similarities between them."

"The question is, who and for what reason were the invocations performed...? Mmm. We still don't know, do we?"

"But we now know that it's because of these invocations that [Sendai](#) 's <<mood>> has changed: auras are more concentrated here, and I think it might also be because the scattered aural balance is collapsing. I won't know until I can investigate further, but what worries me is—" Ayako's eyes sharpened. "Whether or not the invocations have now ended."

"You are saying that the cases of building collapses will likely continue?"

"Yes. But I have no guesses as to the location of the next one, so I don't think we'll be able to stop it. Although if it happens again..."

"They will come to perform the [invocation of the dead](#) . The perpetrators will appear."

"There will probably be victims. But I will put every effort into figuring out the next one before it happens."

Kokuryou nodded deeply and drank the last of the tea in his cup.

"That is all that anyone can do."

Ayako nodded as well. And then she peered at him, starting diffidently: "...Um..."

"What is it?"

"So how did Kageto...I mean, how did Takaya do today?" Ayako inquired, rather in the manner of a mother asking a doctor about the condition of her sick child. Takaya had hurriedly returned to the room on the second floor for dinner.

He hadn't said a single word to Ayako.

"You are worried about him?"

"Ah, well, I mean, he seemed a bit...odd."

"That young monk, hmm? Well, he certainly seems to possess extraordinary power. However, he appears to be worried about something.

His feelings are gradually drawn elsewhere; he is restless and unable to enter a state of calm. As if he were brooding over something..."

"Brooding? Takaya?"

"Yes. Does he have any close friends or family here in [Sendai](#) ?

Ayako looked towards the corridor where she had fleetingly seen Takaya.

(Kagetora...?)

Takaya stood stock-still in front of the telephone.

Kokuryou's wife poked her head out of the kitchen and called to him:

"Takaya-kun. The bath is heated now, so please go in first if you would like. Oh, did you want to use the phone?"

"Ah, can I?"

She smiled and replied, "Yes, of course. Do you want to call your family?"

Takaya closed his mouth and looked down.

When had he opened the Sendai phone book? Lines of numbers for the surname 'Nagasue' were on the page

in front of him. When she remarried, she had changed her name to 'Nagasue Sawako'. The telephone number of his mother's house.

He picked up the handset, his finger reaching for the number pad. He slowly dialed the number in the phone book, but—

He stopped before touching the last number.

He hesitated, then pressed down on the cradle to cut off the call.

Takaya sighed lightly.

His finger moved over the number pad once more, dialing a familiar pattern from heart this time. A moment later, the call connected.

"Yes? This is Narita."

"Ah...Yuzuru? It's me."

"Takaya?"

Yuzuru's familiar voice, from somewhat farther away today.

His strained expression unconsciously softened. But Yuzuru instantly

started laying into him.

"What the heck happened to you! You didn't even show up for the exam! And you didn't tell me anything!"

"Eh. Ah...sorry."

"I thought you might've had a cold or fever or something—I was worried! And when I asked Miya-chan, she said you were off on a trip... What is with you! Where the heck are you?!"

Yuzuru was in a rare temper. Takaya completely broke down at the sound of his voice.

Yuzuru asked doubtfully at Takaya's silence, "Takaya...?" His voice was suddenly quiet. "Has something—happened?"

Takaya smiled slightly. He was glad of Yuzuru's nonchalant manner.

He opened his mouth. What emerged was the usual innocent conversation

The [Sendai](#) night deepened.

"You! Youngster! Stop slacking off and sweep properly!"

The temple compound had been echoing with Kokuryou's deep booming voice

since early morning. Takaya threw down his bamboo broom and turned, eyes narrowed.

"Aargh, dammit—...! Why do I have to do this, anyway?!"

"This is one aspect of training."

"How is it training?!"

Kokuryou turned away, ignoring his outburst.

"Sweep the graveyard with care as well. Don't forget to take the garbage out from behind the temple after you've watered the plants in the garden. After that there are morning services. And then there will be the great sweeping of the main temple. When you have finished, we will continue from where we left off yesterday. Now buck up and get back to work!"

"Wh-hey! Gramps! Gramps, dammit!"

He felt like a proper doormat. Takaya picked up the broom dejectedly.

(Is he insane...?!)

Kokuryou returned after about ten minutes.

"Incidentally, the drains out back appear to be clogged. Could you...? Young monk?"

There was no sign of Takaya in the garden.

His bamboo broom was leaning against the persimmon tree in front of the main temple. Kokuryou scowled.

"That young brat... So he's run away, hmm?"

(Like I'd take that from him!) Takaya spat, muttering to himself. He stomped up the road towards the city.

He'd always been quick-tempered, and he could simply not put up with being treated like a child—so he'd promptly run away. His wristwatch indicated that it was only eight o'clock. There were businessmen in suits and students in the uniforms of the local high schools passing by in the morning rush hour. He felt rather odd wandering around in his casual clothes, but...

(That's right, I haven't even had breakfast yet.)

Recalling his empty stomach, he dug into his trouser pockets. He'd apparently left his wallet behind, and only had some small change. 620 yen.

(I'll have nothing left if I get a combo at McDonald's.)

His impulsive desertion apparently wouldn't last for long.

Takaya heaved a big sigh and looked over at the greenery of [Aoba Castle](#) beyond the river.

Naoe's face suddenly appeared in his mind. The face looked angry. He sighed again.

(You're the one in the wrong,) a voice rebuked him in his mind, and he began walking again dejectedly. He didn't know that meanwhile, Ayako was having a great fit of temper back at Jikou Temple...

Before he even realized it...

His feet had begun following a path familiar to them. This was not the first time they had traveled this road. He could remember this row of houses...

(Ah, right...)

He remembered, and stopped dead. He had come here once, several years ago. It'd been immediately after his mother had divorced and remarried.

He'd run away from home after a big fight with his father, and, with only his life savings, had feverishly traveled to where his mother was living in [Sendai](#) . But though he'd walked up to the front door, in the end he'd been unable to ring the bell.

(That time, huh...?)

It had been snowing that night.

He remembered standing in front of the house for he didn't know how long, looking up at the warm light glowing from the windows of Sawako's house.

(That was such a stupid thing to do.)

Takaya's lips pressed together tightly as he continued walking. A bright blue morning sky spread out overhead. He passed elementary

school children on their way to class. His feet followed that familiar road as if following memory.

And then he came to a stop in front of the house he remembered.

It was a traditional house encircled by a white wall.

In the modest garden, pretty red flowers bloomed: the moss rose that Sawako adored.

He recalled that many of these flowers had bloomed in their garden too, a long time ago, and nostalgia swept over him. When he'd been young, he and Miya had loved taking these seeds and planting them here and there in the garden, waiting with anticipation for them to sprout.

The image of Sawako's smile as she watched her children appeared over the moss rose blossoms.

The flower that no longer grew in their apartment.

He turned at the sound of a child's voice.

(Oh...)

At the doorway, a woman wearing an apron appeared with a boy carrying a schoolbag.

It was Sawako.

Takaya instinctively hid around the corner and peered out at the two figures.

"Do you have everything? Your indoor shoes?"

"Yeah!"

"Good," Sawako replied with a smile. Though she was a little older now, her smile was so much fuller, so much brighter.

He had missed that distant, familiar voice.

"Watch out for cars."

"Okay! See you later!"

"See you later."



The boy bounded towards him. Takaya caught his unrestrained charge as he rounded the corner.

"Ooopsie."

The staggering child stared at this older stranger for a moment, but...

He bowed quickly and dashed away. Takaya looked after him for a moment then turned his gaze back to Sawako.

She was hanging up the laundry for drying. She looked older than he remembered, of course, but her face was radiant, without shadow or pain. It was vibrant almost beyond recognition.

(Ah, of course...) Takaya murmured silently to himself, his eyes downcast.
(She is...happy now.)

Just then—

"Hello—"

A voice suddenly greeted him from behind.

He turned. A young man he didn't know stood there—he had no idea for how long.

Jet-black hair and glossy lips. The beautiful young man looked at Takaya quietly. He held out a white handkerchief.

"? What is it?"

"Please use this if you wish."

He looked at the young man doubtfully. A handkerchief?

"Um?"

"Ah. ...excuse me." The young man smiled lightly and put away the

handkerchief. As he turned on his heels he said over his shoulder, "You looked like you were about to cry."

"__"

Takaya glared at the young man suspiciously.

Kousaka Danjou huffed a light laugh, turned gracefully forward, and walked away.

"..."

Takaya's fierce scowl followed Kousaka as he disappeared into the distance.

Chapter 4: The Tiger and the Dragon

It was past noon when Takaya returned to [Jikou Temple](#) , where Ayako gave him a real tongue-lashing. Her furious, hysterical scolding and red-hot rage were a bit overwhelming, and he did regret (a little) that he hadn't stayed and swept like he should have.

Kokuryou didn't look angry. But he said only one thing: "If you continue in this way, you will never be able to make forward progress."

That stabbed into Takaya.

Though he unthinkingly returned Kokuryou's glare, he could not come up with any rebuttal. Takaya shut his mouth tightly.

That afternoon, about two hours later.

The fourth incident took place.

"! Two places at the same time?!" Takaya exclaimed when he heard.

More collapses had occurred, this time apparently in two different places at approximately the same time. After seeing the news captioned on TV, Ayako had gone out briefly to get more information and returned to report the particulars to Takaya and Kokuryou.

"The two locations were the research building of the [Department of Agriculture at Touhoku University](#) and Sendai West Highway's Aobayama Tunnel Exit .

It happened around 3:30 at both places. The only victims were at the university collapse this time, but a lot of cars were swallowed up by the highway cave-in. It looks like there were also quite a few people who received major or minor injuries."

"So it's really happened again," Kokuryou said, and Takaya yelled:

"'Really happened?' So you expected this? You knew it was going to happen again and just sat on your hands? Hey, this is no joke! People are hurt! If you knew, why didn't you do something about it?!"

"This coming from the one who shirked his chores and snuck out!" Ayako retorted sharply, and looked at Kokuryou. "I believe the perpetrator will certainly come to perform the invocation of the dead. I will head for the scene immediately."

"But there are two locations. If you go by yourself..." Kokuryou said, and both he and Ayako turned to look at Takaya.

Takaya made a sour face. "You're telling me to go too?"

"But will he be all right?" Ayako turned an uneasy gaze towards Kokuryou. It was true that they were shorthanded...

Takaya's temper snapped. He slammed both hands on the table, stood abruptly, and made to walk out of the room.

"Wa-wait, Kagetora...!"

"The point is to catch the guy who comes to perform the invocation of the dead, right? You head for Aobayama. I'll go to the university."

Takaya turned away, eyes hard. "Thanks for worrying 'bout me, but I'm not as weak as you think."

Takaya stared down the silent Ayako and left the living room. Kokuryou rose to go after him.

"Young monk."

Takaya stopped and turned at the front entrance when Kokuryou called out to him.

"Before you go, take a little time to prepare. Since we do not know what will happen."

"?"

He took Takaya's hands and molded his fingers into a strange shape.

"Close your eyes," he said, and Takaya dubiously obeyed. He made the same symbolic gesture and chanted: "On bazaragini harachihataya sowaka."

On bazaragini harachihataya sowaka."

The atmosphere charged, and Kokuryou unclasped his hands.

"You can open your eyes now."

"?"

"That was the mantra of [hikougosin](#) , which wraps your body in armor. Now no evil magic can injure you."

Takaya looked down at his body. Nothing had changed. But Kokuryou

noded reassuringly.

"Please take this as well. It is an amulet made by my hand. It will heal and strengthen you. [Dainichi Nyorai](#) will certainly protect you."

What he gave to Takaya was a small charm in a violet cloth bag. Takaya stared at it for a moment.

"Sorry, Gramps. Thanks."

Kokuryou nodded silently.

Closing his hand around the charm, Takaya opened the door and stepped out into the night wind.

Ayako, standing behind Kokuryou, asked, "Will he be okay?"

"Difficult to say. Yoshiaki has really foisted some troublesome baggage on me," Kokuryou griped, looking down at his hands.

The heat of the <<aura>> from Takaya's hands still tingled.

(A frightening youngster...)

An ominous wind enveloped the streets of [Sendai](#) .

In the darkness, a bell chimed softly.

Two a.m. at the site of the [Touhoku University Agriculture Department](#) collapse.

The dead and injured had long since been transported away, and the investigation of the site had concluded at dusk. The silence of a deep night had settled around the mountain of rubble that had once been a three-floor rebar building. There were no signs of life.

A bell echoed in the darkness. There—

The lone figure of a woman appeared.

Beneath the pale light of the campus garden's electric lamps, the faint figure gradually grew more distinct.

It was a slender young woman with short hair.

She stopped in front of the mound of rubble.

Ringling-ling—the bell in her hand swung.

A naked steel frame was all that remained of the original structure.

Even the rubble contained practically no large pieces; it was as if some unknown power had literally pulverized the concrete into its component materials.

A lukewarm wind rose.

The woman gently extracted a golden rod with tapered pointed ends from her blouse. This was one of the ritual implements of [Esoteric Buddhism](#), called a '[tokko](#)'. With this object in hand, the woman stepped past the no-entry rope.

She entered the building ruins.

And where she walked—

The rubble crumbled into a fine grit.

The wind lifted a dancing cloud of sand.

She stood in front of the gigantic cave-in at the center.

In no time at all, the surrounding rubble had completely crumbled into sand.

The woman kneeled and held the tokko up in offering, then opened her mouth with measured slowness.

"On sarabatataagyata hanna mannanau kyaromi ."

The low voice faded into the night.

"On sowahanba syuda sarabatarama sowahanba shudokan ."

The woman was chanting the furei and jousangou mantras used in the prayers of Esoteric Buddhism .

She appeared to be starting some sort of ceremony there.

"On..."

"What are you doing over there?"

"I"

The woman spun as a voice interrupted her.

A long shadow appeared from the darkness.

"Rather late to be out, isn't it?"

"..."

"I was hoping you'd show up a bit earlier... But at least now I won't have to pull an all-nighter."

"...!"

"So what're you gathering the ghosts for? You're not thinking about holding an olympics here, are you?"

The woman glowered at Takaya, her mouth tightening. Takaya's arrogant smirk disappeared as he glared right back.

"Who are you?"

"__"

"Maybe... [Date Masamune](#) 's stooge?"

The woman suddenly charged Takaya with the [tokko](#) without replying.

"Guh!"

He dodged the attack and went on guard. The woman poised the [tokko](#) and faced Takaya, her eyes glinting with a mountain cat's ferocity.

"Hmn... Bull's-eye, huh?"

The woman attacked. Dodging left and right, he caught the woman's wrist just as the point of the [tokko](#) grazed his chest on the right side.

"!"

He twisted her arm, and the woman gave a little scream.

"What the hell are you bastards plotting? What're you planning to do with the ghosts you call? Answer me!"

The woman's eyes flared.

!

Fire sparks suddenly crackled in front of him, and Takaya went flying.

"Ugh!"

He rolled on the sand. A cloud of dust rose.

(She...! Used <<power>>!)

The woman slowly formed a strange symbolic gesture with her hands.

"On dakini saharakyatei sowaka ."

(Huh?)

"On kiri kaku un sowaka ..."

With a *whoosh*, what looked like pale fireballs flared into existence around the woman. They gradually took on the shape of animals.

The blazing spheres of flame coalesced into faintly-glowing foxes.

(What the...?!)

"On dakini saharakyatei sowaka ."

Murderous intent suffused the woman's face.

"On kiri kaku un sowaka !"

"!"

The foxes all attacked him at once. He narrowly dodged and shifted on guard to face the ghostly beasts who had pulled back their huge tails of light to circle around. The foxes growled, baring sharp teeth, and immediately attacked again like a gale of strong wind.

(You've gotta be kidding me!)

The skulk of foxes grazed against Takaya's body as he tried to ward himself. Shifting his grip on the wooden sword in his hand, he struck towards an attacking fox in savage abandon. It gave no reaction at all as it split in half.

(Wh...?)

The cloven light merged and took on the shape of a fox once more.



"On dakini sahaharakyatei sowaka ."

The woman continued to chant her spell. Takaya held back the foxes, their tails leaving trails of light in the air as they circled him.

"On kiri kaku un sowaka !"

"Ugh!"

One of the foxes sank its teeth into Takaya's right hand, tearing into the flesh of his palm. Blood welled. They were no illusion—they could actually kill and wound people!

"Ah...aaaaah...!"

Moaning with agony, he swung his arm around wildly, but could not dislodge the fox. It clamped its teeth down even harder. At this rate

his hand would be bitten off!

"!"

Takaya's eyes narrowed, and he slammed his hand down viciously against the hard surface of the ground. The spirit fox was torn off and disappeared, but the other foxes instantly attacked. He glared at them with feeling, but couldn't summon any <<nenpa >> at all.

(Dammit!)

Takaya clicked his tongue in disgust and sidestepped the foxes. He tried focusing his will again to attack, to no avail. He should have been able to strike with <<nenpa >>, but nothing was happening. Was it not effective against the foxes? No, it was he himself who couldn't use it!

(Why can't I use <<power>> at a time like this!)

"On kiri kaku un sowaka !"

"!"

The foxes bunched and struck. Just as they were about to sink their fangs into his heart—

A sharp plasma bolt cut them off.

Gyaaaah!

They gave a strange shriek, blazing.

"What?!"

The woman glared and stopped her spell.

The foxes disappeared mid-assault in a shower of fire sparks in front of him. A strange power had come to life at Takaya's left breast.

"You...!"

Takaya climbed to his feet dazedly and shifted his grip on the wooden sword. But in the next instant an invisible power flicked the sword away and thrust him back.

"Waugh!"

Takaya landed face-up. The woman took the opening and pressed hard against his neck. Then she raised the **tokko** over her head.

"I'll send you to the next life!"

"I"

She brought it down with all her might, aiming for Takaya's heart.

But—.

"Uagh!"

The **tokko** stopped dead just before it touch him, as if it had been repelled by a

strong magnet; no matter how much force she put into it, the **tokko** would not sink down any further. Its tip glowed orange above Takaya's left breast.

Something was protecting Takaya's body.

(It's—!)

"You...!"

The woman raised the tokko once more. Takaya tore frantically at the hand strangling his throat. He threw the woman off him with all his might.

"Ah!"

Takaya captured the tokko from the woman's hand as she rolled. The woman's eyes glowed red!

"Waugh!"

He took the <<nenpa >> squarely and went flying once more. He hit the ground and tumbled.

"Ugh..." Takaya groaned, unable to stand. The woman walked towards him, panting wildly.

The blackened, burned charm of Dainichi Nyorai slid out from the pocket of Takaya's chest.

The woman picked it up and incinerated it in the palm of her hand. The ashes of the charm scattered.

Takaya fought to hold onto his receding consciousness, but his vision was already misting.

The woman raised the tokko .

"I will make this the place you breathe your last!"

In that moment.

"!"

The tokko suddenly shot out of the woman's hands as if it had been struck by a bullet. The woman turned, holding her wrist.

"Who's there?!"

Takaya squinted in the same direction with blurring eyes.

(What...?)

A still white shadow flickered in the darkness.

"You!!"

The woman struck out with <<nenpa >>.

A powerful aura moved. Sparks and an earth-shattering roar accompanied

the flare that turned the darkness into a white blaze.

"Gyaah!"

The woman was flung away, and pale white fireballs scattered from her body. She collapsed onto the ground and was still.

(Who...?)

He sensed the person looking at him.

(...La—...dy?)

Takaya's vision gradually dimmed.

(Nao...e...?)

The world receded from him rapidly.

He lost consciousness there on the sand.

His white coat fluttering, a young man walked to the spot where Takaya lay and kneeled on one leg beside him. He picked up Takaya's wounded right hand and wrapped a white handkerchief softly around it.

Kousaka Danjou murmured under his breath, "So you will no longer use your <<powers>> except to protect Narita Yuzuru, Kageatora?"

A cloud of sand danced as if to conceal any reply.

"I absolutely oppose any alliance with the Takeda!" Shigezane shouted at his lord in the brilliantly-illuminated Date mansion of the deep night. "They scheme to take the Northeast even while claiming to join hands with us. Would we not be assisting them in their plot? I absolutely oppose!"

"However, Shigezane-dono," Kojuurou interrupted him sharply, "If thou wouldst consider our current predicament, Takeda's aid is heaven-sent. If they do nothing but draw away Ashina's forces, the possibility is great that we could then catch Mogami in a pincer movement. Destroying Mogami must be our first priority!"

"Even with no power other than our own, we have enough to crush Mogami
Thou art too optimistic, Kojuurou! Takeda is a sly lion! Wilt thou have
us be devoured by this interloper?"

"What, wouldst thou have us be destroyed by those armies lying in wait
around us before we can even approach the lion's jaws?"

Shigezane glared sharply at Kojuurou. Kojuurou emphatically leaned
forward from his kneeling position and said to Masamune, "Our
inferiority of numbers is now quite plain. Dono, we have no choice but
to join with Takeda for the nonce. We returned to protect this land,
our Sendai—'tis self-evident, then, where the emphasis should lie. No
seeds of ambition lie scattered in our resurrection; we returned to
protect the people of this land. To obtain this land, Mogami has
already ravaged its buildings and slain its people. We must destroy
Mogami ere he creates any more victims."

Masamune was completely still as he listened to Kojuurou's words.

There was reason in each of their arguments. But it was true that they had
not returned to participated in the <<Yami-Sengoku >>; they were here to
protect the territory of Sendai from Mogami's grasp even to the bitter end.

The removal of the threat right before their eyes was the first order of
business, as Kojuurou had said, but...

But Masamune was worried about one thing more.

(Mother and Kojiro are with Mogami...)

If what Kousaka had told them was true...

There was bitterness in Masamune's expression.

His mother, [Yoshihime](#) , was [Mogami Yoshiaki](#) 's younger sister. She had married into the Date Clan to stop the fighting between the two clans, but had remained loyal to Mogami.

In her previous life, [Yoshihime](#) had doubted the one-eyed Masamune's abilities as a general. She had favored her younger son Kojirou for succession to the head of the clan and plotted countless times to kill him. Masamune, in order to weed out this internal unrest, had been forced to kill Kojirou.

The bitter memories of those distant days stirred.

('Twas to protect myself.)

He'd had no choice.

He had tried to reason with himself times beyond counting, to allay the unbearable guilt of having killed his brother by his own hand.

It was inevitable that he would come to hate even more the mother who had thus shunned him.

After those events, [Yoshihime](#) , not hiding her shock, had returned to [Yonezawa](#) . Decades later, mother and son were finally able to reconcile with each other in [Yoshihime](#) 's last years when they had both grown weary of the cruelty and loneliness of in-family fighting.

(So after death 'tis turned back into this...)

This was the shadow that now lay over his chest.

It was natural for Kojirou to feel bitter towards him.

And his mother, Yoshihime

(Did she never forgive me...?)

As his one eye fell—

There was suddenly a big commotion in front of the mansion's entrance. Shigezane and the others whirled simultaneously.

"!"

"What...!"

Kojuurou was the first to stand; the family retainers followed. Shigezane, about to chase after them, looked back at Masamune.

"Dono—"

Masamune returned his grave, intense gaze and stood.

"What is it, Kojuurou?"

"Dono."

Masamune pushed his way through the retainers to the front of the entrance to see an unfamiliar young man lying in Kojuurou's arms.

"...!"

Next to them was Kousaka Danjou .

"What dost thou mean by this, Kousaka-dono?"

"I am sorry to cause you trouble. It was very sudden."

"Who is this young man?"

"He was being attacked by one of Mogami's underlings, from whom I rescued him. If it would not be too much trouble, perhaps you could lend him a room and treat his wounds...."

Masamune looked at Kousaka sharply.

"Is he of thy acquaintance?"

"..."

Kousaka's expression was as cool as ever.

Kojuurou said tactfully, "We shall ready a bed at once. Tsunamoto -dono, wouldst thou see to the preparations?"

Kojuurou returned to the interior of the house with several others.

Kousaka said to Masamune as he removed his coat, "The night is somewhat

cold, is it not? I beg your indulgence for lodging for the night. 'Tis too late to return to my hotel."

"I do not mind..."

"May I beg a shower as well? And perhaps fresh robes and a cup of

coffee..." Kousaka said, stepping inside. There was feverish activity among the people of the household. Kousaka, as if cognizant of his own supercilious behavior, stopped mid-way down the hall and suddenly turned back to Masamune.

"Date-dono."

"?"

"When that young man wakes, take care in confronting him."

"What?"

Kousaka smirked. "He is a rather troublesome person. And likely will be for Date-dono as well."

"... What means thou by that?"

"He is of the Uesugi."

Masamune glowered. Shigezane and the others beside him were stunned.

"Uesugi?! Yet thou hast said that Kagekatsu-dono has not been resurrected—"

"You should perhaps know that Lord Kenshin once had two adopted sons?"

"?"

"Lord Kagekatsu and one other: [Uesugi Kagetora](#) . This young man is Lord Kagetora."

"!"

All of them inhaled sharply. —Uesugi Kagetora !

Kousaka said, his smile even wider, "He is also the supreme commander of Lord Uesugi's onryou hunters, the Meikai Uesugi Army . They are called "Uesugi's Yasha-shuu ", and he is one of the kanshousha ."

Masamune looked down at the unconscious Takaya in astonishment.
When he

looked back over his shoulder, Kousaka had already disappeared down the
hall.

(Uesugi Kagetora —...)

The slightest amount of strain stiffened his face.

In a nook of the garden at sunset—

The tiny figure of his mother was crouched among her moss roses, clipping the flowers there one by one.

He stood behind her, watching over her.

It was as if she were clipping away all memories of him.

His mother's expression as she turned.

As if she were asking forgiveness from them—

As if she were asking forgiveness...

He could hear the chirping of birds.

Morning's clear light shot through the paper sliding doors.

When Takaya came to, it was about five hours later. An unfamiliar ceiling, an unfamiliar room. The futon he lay on was brand-new and smelled of the sun. In his confusion he tried to leap to his feet, but—

"...Ugh...!"

The numbness of his body tragically frustrated his efforts.

He couldn't reconcile his current state.

(Where...?)

It wasn't Kokuryou's temple. The Japanese-style room, which seemed relatively new, smelled of cypress. He surveyed his surroundings, trying to puzzle it out, but there were no signs of people nearby.

He realized that his right hand was wrapped in a bandage. Someone appeared to have treated him.

(What the heck happened?)

He could recall much of it: encountering that enigmatic woman where the university building had been destroyed, taking a direct hit from a

<<nenpa >>

and collapsing. But that was where his memories ended. Someone had apparently carried him away in the nick of time, but... His memories broke off abruptly at that point.

(Where am I?)

Takaya blinked.

Just then, someone approached the room, and the door slid open smoothly. The face that peered inside belonged to a young woman dressed in Japanese-style clothes.

"Oh...thou art awake," the woman said in a lovely voice, and smiled at him softly. Her long black hair swayed gracefully. Takaya stammered, covered in confusion:

"Um...ah..."

"How dost thou fare? Wouldst thou have rice soup or aught to eat?"

"Ah, where is this?" Takaya inquired from the pillow. "Is this your home?"

The woman gave him a small, quiet smile. "Thou couldst say that I am renting a room here, but thou needst not be suspicious of us. Please be at ease. Thou art safe here."

"Ah, you are..."

The woman stopped Takaya from getting up.

"Please, rest thou for a little while longer."

"No, but—"

"We shall prepare a meal for thee immediately," the woman said, and turned to leave the room. But the door slid open, and a tall man with an eye patch appeared.

"Ah, Dono."

"Ah, thou wert here, Mego. Thou hast come to see how he fares?"

(Dono?)

He looked at the man, startled.

Masamune also noticed that Takaya was awake.

"So he hath regained consciousness at last?" Masamune asked his wife [Megohime](#). "Make thee morning preparations, Mego. I shall break my fast here this morn."

"Dono. I prithee do not tax him overmuch—"

"'Tis well; content thyself," Masamune said lightly, and [Megohime](#) replied with a troubled smile. After she left the room, Masamune sat down cross-legged next to Takaya. Then he folded his arms and peering silently at Takaya with his one eye.

Takaya was plainly bewildered.

But Masamune seemed completely unconcerned.

"Hmmm..." he hummed, and suddenly slid forward to jerk Takaya's chin up

with his right hand. Takaya was surprised, but immediately glared.

"Ho." Masamune's left eye narrowed. "A bold countenance; 'tis the unmistakable look of a general."

"You—"

Masamune grinned, looking at the wary Takaya. "'Twould seem that thou hast been fairly done over by the Mogami."

"The Mogami..." Takaya was taken aback. "That woman from yesterday wasn't an [onryou](#) of the Date?"

"How now, what foolishness." Masamune smiled, letting go of Takaya.

"Why should we destroy this our own territory? 'Twas the Mogami. Or if not so, the Ashina."

"We... Our own...!" Realization finally dawned on Takaya, and he took in a sharp breath in astonishment. "You...you're not...!"

Masamune said calmly, "We mean thee no harm. Be at ease."

(He can't be...)

Takaya looked with fresh eyes at the young man.

But it was true that the force of the personality that pervaded his entire body belonged to no ordinary person. The word 'general' seemed to have been made for this man with his refined and powerful presence.

Conviction shuddered through Takaya.

(He is...[Date Masamune](#) .)

Tension enveloped both of them.

Masamune's single eye glinted as he gazed straight at Takaya.

Chapter 5: Kyougamine

"I'm

fine, so. ...Yeah. I'm going to stay here for a bit, so thanks for taking care of things over there. ...It's okay, stop worrying about me," Takaya told Ayako at [Jikou Temple](#) and put down the handset. He had recovered, but knowing now that this was Date's mansion, felt inclined to stay for a little while longer to check out the situation.

When he turned, Masamune was standing behind him.

"If thou canst bear some exercise, wilt thou take a walk with me? 'Tis not far."

"?"

"I would fain visit [Kyougamine](#) ," he said, and looked at [Katakura Kagetsuna](#) nearby. "Accompany us, Kojuurou."

"Ay."

Takaya looked at Masamune, his wariness undiminished.

The One-Eyed Dragon who had been resurrected into the modern age—.

He should not yet know of Takaya's true identity as [Uesugi Kagetora](#) . If he did learn that Takaya was one of Kenshin's [Yasha-shuu](#) , whose aim was the destruction of the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#)>>, Takaya's safety might yet be in doubt.

(What the hell are they planning?)

Masamune leisurely strolled away as Takaya stared at his back.

Not far from [Aoba Castle](#) , residences pressed up against the place which had once been called [Kyougamine](#) , the site of the [Zuihouden](#) , [Date Masamune](#) 's mausoleum. The [Zuihouden](#) had been a luxurious and glorious piece of architecture built in the

Momoyama style, and in the pre-war days had been designated a national

treasure. Unfortunately, it had been destroyed in the air-raid against [Sendai](#) in the twentieth year of Showa (1945).

Afterwards, there had been many petitions for reconstruction, and by means of excavation and detailed scientific investigation, and at the great cost of eight hundred million yen and five years of labor, the remodeled [Zuihouden](#) had been completed in the fifty-fourth year of Showa (1979).

The master of this magnificent mausoleum walked up the shallow flight of stone steps beneath the line of cedar trees.

Masamune looked up at the tall luxuriant trees with deep emotion.

Following behind him, Takaya carefully noted Masamune's every action.

"This neighborhood has truly been much changed..."

Takaya stiffened, startled. Giving no mind to Takaya's reaction,

Masamune continued, looking out into the distance: "In this spot alone

have traces of that era been preserved, Kojuurou."

"My lord hath the right of it," Kojuurou, also known as [Katakura Kagetsuna](#) agreed, looking up at the cedar trees in turn. "Dono, of a certainty dost thou live on within the hearts of succeeding generations."

"Stay, what desirest thou to say?"

"Nay, naught in particular." Kojuurou smiled slightly. "That I could meet my lord thus once more in this world fills my heart with wonder."

"... I, too." Masamune's single eye narrowed. "Never did I imagine that I might gaze upon my mausoleum with this single eye."

Beside them, Takaya listened to the conversation of lord and retainer. Their manner somehow gave him a sense of déjà vu.

"Thou art Ougi-dono, thou hast said?"

"Eh? Yeah..."

"Is this thy first visit to [Sendai](#) ?"

"Uh...well..."

"Ah. 'Tis a fair city, this [Sendai](#) ,

is it not? A flourishing and prosperous city of the Northeast. Though people created this city, this city now mobilizes its people. Its prosperity was once [Edo](#) and [Osaka](#) 's—no, 'twas their superior." Masamune smiled boyishly. "Dost thou not think that this city alone can make a kingdom?"

"!"

"It could be made the capital of a kingdom. Though the dream of the Oushuu ended long ago, dost thou not think that the power of the city as it is

now is more than enough to stand as a kingdom's—as Japan's—capital?"

"—"

"My wish was to make this land of Sendai a capital like it is now."

Masamune ascended the stairs, satisfaction plain on his face.

Takaya was just a bit disappointed. He couldn't detect any particular ambition behind Masamune's words.

(What in the world is he...)

"What? Give money?" Masamune exclaimed at the entrance, scowling in shock. "One must pay to enter a mausoleum? I did not die so foolishly."

Kojuurou smiled ironically. "Mayhap 'tis for thy journey upon the Roku Dou ."

"'Tis become a strange world," Masamune said with a sigh. "Await me here Kojuurou."

"Soft: but I have brought enough for my share."

"'Twas not my meaning. The two of us shall go in."

Kojuurou smiled wryly and said only, "Take care, my lord" as he watched them step inside.

The Zuihouden stood before them immediately upon entering. Masamune invited Takaya inside and stood looking up at his own mausoleum.

"'Tis a handsome mausoleum, is it not, Ougi-dono? Even Toyotomi Hideyoshi hath not one so fine," Masamune said proudly. "Dost thou not think the

way one is interred after death tells easily of one's entire life?"

"__"

Takaya finally opened his mouth to ask bluntly, "Was it you who saved me...who took out that woman?"

Masamune turned. Takaya looked at him with direct eyes.

"We cared for thee, but 'twas our guest who saved thee."

"Guest? That's—"

"What—" Masamune inquired quietly, "wert thou doing in that place? Didst thou predict that one of the Mogami would come?"

Though he was silent, the answer was written plainly on his face. Masamune, on the other hand, was a closed book.

"Thou knowest aught, dost thou not? Wilt thou not say? What Mogami was doing there."

"I..." Takaya averted his eyes. "I thought it was the Date who were destroying the buildings and calling the spirits."

"Calling... Dost thou know of the invocation of the dead?"

"A bit, I guess, but I don't know what it's for. But I'm not just gonna let them keep killing and hurting innocent people." Takaya glared sharply at Masamune. "I will absolutely not let fighting between ghosts kill the living."

"Verily, thou hast the right of it."

"Then why did you come back at all? All of you are already dead, aren't you?! But because you've returned, a lot of people are gonna get sucked in and get killed! That's just...totally wrong!" Takaya shouted, angrier by the minute. "Your life is already done! You can't do it over!"

"..."

Masamune looked at him quietly. Takaya panted with the force of his outburst. Masamune opened his mouth. "We are not here to redo our lives."

"?"

"The destiny of our former lives was the will of Heaven. There was naught that we could do but lament it. None can redo their lives. But if I could..." Masamune's single eye laughed. "'Twould be a fresh start."

"...!"

Masamune looked over his shoulder at Takaya's stiffening face as he walked out.

"Be at ease. We desire only to protect this territory of [Sendai](#) ."

Takaya stared at Masamune's broad shoulders, which had once borne the weight of a country. He had walked seventy years with the people of an entire nation on those shoulders.

(Are those his true feelings...?)

He followed.

"Ougi-dono. Art thy parents in good health?"

Takaya looked blank at the sudden change in topic.

Parents—

Takaya's brows creased lightly. "... Yeah."

"I see." Masamune gazed up at the tall, thick line of cedar trees.

"Even those without children have parents. Whether alive or separated by death...the fact that they are one's parents changes not."

"..."

"We begin our existence in our mothers' wombs. Our mothers are our home. One could say that they are our origin. That changes not though our flesh be destroyed. I have but one mother who gave birth to me. Yet—" His eye narrowed slightly. "Though a child hath but one mother, it doth not always follow that a mother hath but one child."

Takaya, not grasping Masamune's point, looked dubious. Masamune appeared to be speaking about himself.

"Although I did not wish to despise it my whole life... 'twas this single eye which denied me my mother's love, and my child's heart cursed this ugly visage."

Takaya took another look at Masamune's eye patch.

"I accepted over and over again that 'twas anxiety over the future of the Date Clan, but... 'Tis never bearable to be neglected and hated by one's mother."

"—"

The image of Sawako in her moss rose garden surfaced in Takaya's mind. The mother who, smiling, gazed after her child—a child that was not himself.

"That's....not true."

"?"

"It doesn't have anything to do with your parents. I'm me. I made myself, I raised myself, so what's so special about it? Everyone's the same. The origin or whatever doesn't matter anymore, does it?"

"... Doesn't matter anymore, hmm?"

"If you look at faults, in the end they're just the same as people everywhere. But children don't complain, no matter what kind of

good-for-nothings they live with. 'Cause even if they think 'why do I have parents like that?', they can't do anything about it. So even if they just have to accept it, even if they can't do anything but bear the mistakes of their parents, are they still supposed to go and say 'thank you for giving me birth?!'"

Masamune was silent.

"Mother or child, in the end they were all so *you* could be cute. If *you're* protected, if *you're* happy, then to hell with the children. If you can run away on your own

and leave us behind, then you must not even have cared about our feelings at all...!"

Takaya abruptly returned to himself. He shut his mouth, disconcerted. Masamune's eye lowered quietly.

"... Thou must treasure thy mother greatly."

Takaya's head lifted.

"I know not the circumstances, but I believe thou dost. Last night in thy delirium thou didst call out for thy mother."

(Wh...!)

Takaya reddened. But before he could rush into an explanation, Masamune added, "My mind is disturbed."

"...?"



"Yet, though she is important to me, I cannot help but tire of her as mine enemy."

Takaya looked curiously at Masamune, who had a lost expression in his upward gaze.

"You—"

"My mother... was once the [Demon Princess of the Ouu](#) , she who attempted to end my life with poison. She and my younger brother, Kojirou, desire to invade [Sendai](#) ."

"!"

"She has sided with mine old enemy Mogami."

With those words, Masamune began walking towards the [Kansenden](#) . Takaya was somewhat startled, but looking at Masamune's lonely figure, unthinkingly ran to catch up.

"Wait! Stop leaving me behind!"

Masamune stopped and turned.

"I'll probably..."

"?"

"I'll probably wipe you out of this world. Is that really okay? I'll probably end up forcing you to go."

Masamune's single eye smiled.

"That, too, shall be fine."

Kojuurou was waiting for them on the stone stairs. He greeted them with a slight smile.

"Welcome back, my lord."

"Mmm. Hast thou sensed any suspicious presences?"

"Nay. This is truly the sacred precincts of the Date; few spirits are allowed to approach. My lord has enjoyed a long conversation, it seems."

"Ay. I was proud simply to speak of my mausoleum." Masamune gave a great booming laugh.

A line appeared between Takaya's brows. —Evidently, an inexperienced youngster like himself could not converse on an equal level; Masamune was too large a handful to get a grip on.

(So, this is the One-Eyed Dragon Masamune...)

The tiger was still too young to challenge the dragon soaring across the sky, it seemed.

Kojuurou followed protectively behind his master as he walked off. Looking at them, Takaya suddenly noticed: (That's...)

Kojuurou unexpectedly blurred in his mind.

(He reminds me of someone—)

Master and retainer walked ahead, exchanging jests. Kojuurou's affection and respect for Masamune were plain in every word of his soft, deadpan replies. And he had seen the love and sternness in those eyes somewhere before...

Takaya suddenly remembered as they descended the hill.

(Of course—...)

His face appeared in Sendai's sky.

(Naoe— He reminds me of you...)

The wind rippled through the treetops.

A flight of birds took wing from [Kyougamine](#) .

When the three of them returned to the mansion—

"?"

In front of the door stood a man in a white coat who looked as if he were waiting for someone. One look at his face and Takaya reacted with startled recognition.

(! He's the guy from yesterday!)

It was the suspicious young man he'd seen in front of Sawako's house yesterday.

Not noticing Takaya's agitation, Masamune hailed the young man.

"How now, couldst thou not have waited within for our return?"

Takaya started a second time.

(Do they know each other?)

Leaning against the plaster wall, the beautiful young man smiled at Takaya.

"Well, well. We met yesterday, I believe."

"... Hi," Takaya greeted him dubiously. He appeared to have remembered as well.

The young man said to Masamune, "'Tis about time for me depart. But first I wished to take my leave of you, Dono."

"Wilt thou be returning home?"

"I do not believe I have yet heard your reply. And there is also this."

Kousaka extracted a golden rod wrapped in cloth from his pocket. It was without a doubt the **tokko** belonging to the woman from last night.

(Th...!) Takaya's eyes widened. (Why does he have that!)

"This is the **tokko** left by the Mogami last night. She appeared to be using this ritual implement to perform an invocation of the dead."

"...!"

Takaya looked at the young man in amazement. So he knew of the invocation of the dead too? Then could it have been this man who had saved him last night?

(Then he was also the one who took out that woman and carried me here...?)

"Was that you?"

Kousaka gave him a quick sideways glance, but continued speaking to Masamune without answering him.

"The destruction of the building was the earth-purification (cleansing and removal of various things, such as impurities, from the earth) required for an invocation. It was apparently for the establishment of a 'platform' for the invocation. Of course, this **vajra tokko** was for the creation of a barrier around the 'platform'.

"A spell for an invocation of the dead, hmm? Yet why such obsession over the choice of location? Why that spot and no other? Some grand design must lie behind these invocations to require such monstrous acts

simply for the creation of these 'platforms'—thus do I believe".

"That is something I still do not know. On this [tokko](#) ,
the <<feel>> of the user still remains. It should be
possible to track the movement of aural disturbances with this scent.
Although—" Kousaka chuckled. "I know not whether the Date has
someone
of those abilities."

"!"

Kousaka handed the [tokko](#) to Masamune.

"I shall seek your reply another day."

Kousaka left with those parting words. Masamune and the others watched
him go off with indignation.

"Who is that guy?"

"—"

Masamune muttered disgustedly, "One whom I cannot see into."

"?"

"Kousaka Danjou Masanobu. He is the one I spoke of as our guest."

"! [Kousaka Danjou](#) !" Takaya exclaimed sharply and turned back, but
Kousaka's shadow had already disappeared around the corner. But—

([Kousaka Danjou](#) —the guy who resurrected [Takeda Shingen](#) ...?!)

In the incident that had happened previously in [Matsumoto](#) .

Which meant that he was the one who had caused Yuzuru to be possessed by Shingen!

(He couldn't have...!)

"Do not let down thy guard. There is slyness in his eyes. He will certainly act as Shigezane predicted," Masamune muttered, and Takaya turned sharply back to him.

Reawakened wariness.

(Is he connected to Takeda?)

Misgivings blossomed in his heart.

(Is Takeda behind Date?)

Takaya's eyes began to burn with hostility.

In deep thought, Masamune was still gazing fixedly at the spot where Kousaka had moved out of sight.

The ominous shadow of a woman observing them blended into the shadows of the wall.

He left Masamune's mansion that evening. Since he wasn't familiar with the place, he had no choice but to go as far as the city and call Ayako

to come pick him up.

He'd thought that Masamune might try to detain him, but surprisingly, he'd been allowed to leave with no objections at all. If they were connected with Takeda, there was a great possibility that they knew he was Kagetora. He had no clue what Masamune was thinking for letting such a dangerous person slip out from under his nose; maybe he was being left to sink or swim on his own, or did Masamune simply not fear Kagetora's <<power>> at all?

(But if they really have no ambition other than to protect Sendai—)

For the time being, their aims were the same.

(But is he really letting me go?) Takaya wondered, and quickly looked around him.

No, he couldn't dismiss it so lightly. Not when he was dealing with the famous One-Eyed Dragon Masamune. He had probably said those things to

take advantage of Takaya's naiveté and use him to expand Date's power in the <<Yami-Sengoku >>.

(I can't trust the onryou .)

Takaya began walking towards the twilight city of Sendai .

"Ka-Kagetora!"

Ayako had driven to the designated rendezvous, the front entrance of an

arcade facing a main street in the center of town. It was a little past 6:30. Ayako got off Kokuryou's white Laurel, stomped towards Takaya straddling the guardrail, and suddenly—

Whack!

—slapped Takaya's face hard.

"Oo...

He stared dumbfounded at Ayako. They were abruptly drawing the attention of pedestrians waiting for a walk signal.

"...ooow. What the hell was that for, dammit!"

"Argh, geez! What the heck do you think you were doing?! Giving me *one* call and not even telling me where you were? Where have you been maraudering around, anyway?!"

"Well, you didn't have to hit me, sheesh!"

"Naoe would've blown a gasket if anything had happened to you, and then I would've been hearing it!"

Abbot Kokuryou alighted from the passenger side and rushed over to mediate.

"All right, all right. Let us not brawl in the middle of the street. It's indecent."

"Bu-but this child—geez!"

"But he came back safe and sound, so everything is all right, yes?"

Ayako sulked, disgruntled. Abashed, Takaya pressed a hand against his

injured cheek. Kokuryou looked him over and commented, "You don't seem

to have received any major injuries. No, Ayako-san was truly worried about you. I have heard that a young woman was found lying at the university site this morning and was taken to the hospital... I thought that it might have had something to do with you..."

"A woman? Has she regained consciousness yet?"

Ayako and Kokuryou looked at each other as if to say, "So it is true."

"She woke up at the hospital, but claimed that she does not remember anything of why she was there or what she was doing."

Takaya's expression turned cold. "—Was she possessed?"

"So you really did see that woman last night, right? Which means some onshou made her their spiritual vessel and came to perform the invocation of the dead?"

"Yeah."

"Then it is the Date who're doing it..."

"Actually, it's not," Takaya flatly cut her off, and Ayako gave him a strange look. "Ah, er... I mean, I don't think it is. Most likely."

"It's not Date? Then who—" Ayako was taken aback. "Mogami? You're saying that Mogami's onshou is the one responsible for the invocations?"

"Probably. I think we can believe that much."

"Believe? Kageatora...?" Ayako peered at Takaya. "What does that mean?"

"Um. Well..."

It was Kokuryou who guessed the truth and asked the question. "Where did you go after the university? What were you doing? You met someone did you not?"

"—"

"Something has given you a lead, yes?"

Takaya mumbled inarticulately, "...well, you know, um, [Sendai](#) is, er, Date's base, right? So, yeah, they wouldn't go around destroying their own city—"

"I don't know about that. They're probably trying to gain control of society like Shingen was."

"That's totally not it," Takaya was about to say, and stopped as he suddenly thought, (Wait a minute...)

There was contact between Date and Takeda. Didn't that mean that even if such was not Date's intent, Takeda would probably be aiming for [Senda](#)?

(But still, that guy called Kousaka rescued me—)

"Argh, geez! What the heck happened, Kagetora! Who did you meet? Just tell me!"

"Ah...woah..."

Takaya squirmed against Ayako's grip on his collar. Kokuryou cut him off.

"Could it be, young monk... Did you meet someone from the Date?"

Ayako whipped around to look at Kokuryou, and immediately whipped back to Takaya.

"Is that true, Kage-tora?"

"Ah. Well..."

"Wh-why didn't you say anything about something this important earlier!"

"S-stop shaking me!"

"However, Ayako-san..."

Ayako abruptly let go of Takaya and turned to Kokuryou.

"This means that the barrier now being erected around [Sendai](#) was not created for Date, but Mogami?"

"Barrier?"

Takaya pushed past Ayako to ask Kokuryou. "What're you talking about?! This city is in the middle of some kinda barrier?"

"Those incidents of structure collapses were expressly for the foundation of a barrier that would be constructed around [Sendai](#) ,"

Ayako replied behind him. "We finally figured it out after the fifth incident occurred. If you plot the destroyed structures on a map, they all land on the parameter of a circle with a radius that's just about 1.5 kilometers from the center of the city. So it looks like they want to build a barrier within this circle."

"A barrier to do what?"

"Well. Even if they're all called barriers, various kinds have different properties. Some block outside influences from contaminating a ritual, some make it easier for the makers to use their powers, some bring out the special effects of a particular spell... There're lots of ways to make them too; the simplest is to encircle an area with small pebbles—even a line drawn on the ground can become a 'barrier'."

Using spell 'platforms', a large-scale barrier encircling the city could be built. In other words, the destruction of structures established a 'platform' to perform the spell known as the invocation of the dead, each of which created one barrier point.

"So the invocations of the dead are summoning spirits to the barrier points. Their power provides energy to strengthen those points. When performed in a circular pattern, a circular barrier can be raised."

"Then what would the barrier be for? Would Mogami be using it to amplify their powers so that they can take over [Sendai](#) or something...?"

"An amplification barrier, hmm? That's not out of the question, but it looks like this barrier isn't as simple as that."

"Huh—?"

Ayako scowled. She had taken two days to perform a very detailed [spiritual sensing](#), but the properties of the encircling barrier had not been so simply divined.

"And it looks like the maker has a considerable amount of power."

Frankly, it's pretty much impossible to figure out what effects this barrier will have before it's completed."

"But wouldn't it be too late if we wait until the barrier is complete to see its effects?"

"That's true. I've said that the <<mood>> of the earth has changed, right? I thought that it was the distribution balance of spirits in the land crumbling because of the invocations of the dead, but it looks like I was wrong."

"Wrong...? So..."

"So I wonder if the <<mood>> of Sendai is changing because of some other spell being performed. The spiritual sensing I performed told me that the 'platforms' at the building collapse sites were being used to conduct spells other than the invocations."

"Spells that are manipulating the <<mood>> of the city?"

"Yeah," Ayako said seriously. "What's bad is that mixed up in all of this is a spell that appears to use spirit foxes called 'koko'."

"Spirit foxes?"

"Yeah. Sendai's <<mood>> is entwined with the 'kodoku ' of the foxes. I'm not totally sure about this, but. I think that the other spell that's being performed here involves 'the Way of Dakiniten '."

(The Way of Dakiniten ?)

Just as Takaya was about to inquire further.

Another voice from the hustle and bustle of the city suddenly called his name.

"Takaya...?"

"Ah"—Takaya's shoulders trembled.

"Oh?" Kokuryou thought, turning, and the surprised Ayako looked in the same direction.

"Takaya. It's you, isn't it? Takaya...?"

A woman's voice. A full, familiar voice.

Kokuryou and Ayako's eyes widened at the small woman who had called out

Takaya's name. She said again, "You're Takaya, aren't you? You are, aren't you? Takaya."

He turned as if bespelled.

A sweet-looking woman stood there with her shopping bags.

There was a energetic-looking elementary school-age boy with her.

The two from the moss rose garden...

Takaya stood transfixed.

(Mom—)

Chapter 6: Hawk of the North

Naoe had ended up in Yamagata at around the same time. For a while he'd been running back and forth between Tokyo and Yamagata investigating the violent and bizarre death of a graft suspect in a corruption case, but had finally found a lead and followed it into Yamagata City .

The corruption case, which revolved around the financing and purchase of land for the development of a resort, had exploded into a huge bribery scandal implicating everyone from the banks to the government. The bribes had originated from a large Sendai-based real estate company. Two members of its executive staff with strong connections with the case had died.

Working on his own, Naoe had used spiritual sensing and hypnotism to infiltrate the prosecution, and utilized any and all means at his disposal to gather information and seek out the truth. And he had finally pinpointed a person who seemed to have some connection to the <<Yami-Sengoku >>: Ueshima, a big-shot in the National Diet and a member of the ruling party from the precinct of Yamagata , who evidently had long-standing ties to the real estate company in question and had been arranging favors for it for a long time. He also appeared to be deeply involved with the current case.

Ueshima was the second-in-command of a very influential faction within the current ruling party. He had, in fact, been regarded as one of the favorites in the fall elections for president.

But now that this corruption case had come to light—

(Ueshima will probably take the hardest fall...)

Murders to destroy evidence of grafts. That was how Naoe saw these strange deaths.

Of course, arranging for someone to die of animal bites in their own bed was a highly unusual way to commit murder—almost unimaginable, in fact.

Ordinarily-speaking, at least.

But not if [onryou](#) had been used.

It was by no means impossible if Ueshima had made some sort of deal with a <<[Yami-Sengoku](#)>> [onshou](#) to get rid of the bribe suspects. Ueshima would probably have been

willing to strike a bargain in order to weather this storm in which his presidential candidacy and career as a Diet member hung in the balance

Having conjectured thus far, Naoe tailed Ueshima for about a week. Ueshima returned to his home in [Yamagata](#) and made no further moves. Naoe thoroughly checked the people coming in and out of the house, utilizing hypnotic suggestion to the full to gather information.

He had finally learned the identity of the [onshou](#) Ueshima was dealing with, as well as the particulars of the deal itself.

The [onshou](#) was [Mogami Yoshiaki](#) .

The deal was the usage of Ueshima's body as spiritual vessel by Mogami Yoshiaki .

"I see. So they've begun the invocations of the dead."

Naoe was holding the cell phone conversation with Ayako in his Cefiro while smoking a cigarette, the day after she and Takaya entered Sendai . It was one of their regularly scheduled communications to touch bases with each other.

A barrier had been erected around Ueshima's mansion, and all <<shinenha>>

was blocked off, so he could only use listening devices and the like to get a sense of the situation within (he had secretly planted them on people coming in and out of the place). The radio waves would have reached his hotel room, but he had parked the car near the mansion and set up watch there so that he could immediately react to anything happening.

"So the building collapses apparently do have something to do with the <<Yami-Sengoku>>," Naoe grimaced.

"And this is from Kokuryou-san: it looks like the onshou are appearing one after the other in the city," Ayako added. "I need to do a more detailed spiritual sensing , but the <<energy>> of the earth is really strange."

"Strange? The <<jike>> has changed?"

"I don't know if it's changed or not, but it's not natural. It doesn't feel like something brought about by the ordinary gathering of people

and spirits' <<energies>>, but more like something that's been created or manipulated. It just feels really strange somehow."

"A manipulated <<energy>>? You haven't found any connection between that and the invocations of the dead yet, have you?"

"Mmm. I don't have positive proof yet, but I think I will have evidence of that the next time we talk."

"I see. It does worry me. Whatever we do, our first priority must be to catch the onshou doing these invocations and perform choubuku as soon as possible so no other innocents are injured. Will you be all right with that by yourself?"

"Yeah, probably."

"... Then I'll leave it to you," Naoe said, ending the conversation.

After a moment of silence, he inquired, "How...is Kagetora-sama?"

"Kagetora? I guess he was behaving himself during Kokuryou-san's special training. He was learning meditation."

"Is it going well?"

"Wee...eeell," Ayako replied with a confounded groan. "He definitely has Uesugi Kagetora 's genius, and Kokuryou-san was full of praise as well, but the problem seems to be with something inside him."

Naoe's face stiffened with surprise. "An autosuggestion?"

"Ah, no, it's not that. I guess it has something to do with Ougi Takaya. He's been strangely distracted since he came to Sendai . You know, Naoe, you haven't heard anything, have you? Anything about Sendai ?"

"No..."

In truth, though Naoe had known Uesugi Kagetora well, he had no such in-depth knowledge of Ougi Takaya. Takaya didn't talk about himself, and refused to let other people in.

(Though I heard that his parents divorced a few years ago...)

"You know, Naoe, he's more of a kid than he lets on. He immediately rebuffs people, but don't you think that deep in his heart he wants to depend on someone?"

Naoe's eyes opened abruptly. Ayako continued, "He—I wonder if he'll open his heart to someone?"

"Haruie?"

"Naoe. I really think you should be by his side," Ayako stated forcefully. "For him...for Ougi Takaya, we're some strangers he just met, but surely we can form new bonds with him. Maybe Ougi Takaya, now Uesugi Kagetora, is beginning to see Naoe Nobutsuna as someone necessary to him?"

"What are you suddenly..."

"He's troubled. I mean, all of a sudden he's Uesugi Kagetora and he's been dragged into the <<Yami-Sengoku >>—he doesn't know who he is anymore, so of course he's uneasy. Someone needs to be with him. He's more fragile than he appears. Much more brittle and easily hurt than that kid Yuzuru."

"Haruie."

"—"

For a moment Ayako was silent. Then she admitted in a low voice, "I'm beginning to think that he's not Kagetora."

Naoe blinked.

"Because he doesn't know anything! And his personality is totally different. Kagetora was considerate and courteous and reliable and intelligent—he was perfect! At least, he was to me. But this kid is totally different. Like he's a totally different person. Except—when he's troubled, he has the same look in his eyes as Kagetora did."

There was a faintly pained expression on Naoe's face.

"I know that you're trying to make amends towards Kagetora, but that would probably hurt this child. When I saw the two of you in [Matsumoto](#), I could see the sort of trust that existed between you a long time ago, and it made me really happy. I don't want history to repeat itself."

"Haruie."

"Please stay by his... Please stay by Ougi Takaya's side, by the side of this child who isn't Kagetora, and help him."

Naoe was silent. Then he replied in a low voice, eyes downcast, "...I will."

They hung up.

Naoe slumped back against the seat and closed tired eyes. Ayako's words

echoed in his ears: "I don't want history to repeat itself."

(—I won't let history repeat itself...), he murmured in the space of his mind as if in reply. He had etched those words endlessly into his heart. That if he had a chance to do everything over, he would not let history repeat itself. That he would not do anything to cause that person sadness or pain. —And so, even if he had to deceive himself...

It was not hard.

He could endure the agony of lying to himself. It was nothing compared to the way he had hurt *him*.

"You alone I shall never forgive for all of eternity."

That pronouncement of exile from thirty years ago, spat at him as if seeped in Kagetora's blood, still echoed ceaselessly in his ears. But now it was Ougi Takaya's voice saying those words, those words that flayed him, and for the past few days he had woken up in the mornings covered in cold sweat.

(I'm probably just tired.)

Plunged into brooding, Naoe lifted the cigarette filter to his lips.

He hadn't been getting enough sleep lately, and now really rather regretted the fact that he hadn't been more prudent and asked Nagahide for help ([Yasuda Nagahide](#) —also known as Chiaki Shuuhei—was still in [Matsumoto](#) guarding Narita Yuzuru). Realizing that he'd been going to extremes to

bury himself in work because he'd wanted to avoid Kagetora, Naoe sunk into even deeper depression.

"Maybe the child that is Ougi Takaya is beginning to see Naoe Nobutsuna as someone necessary to him?"

That was probably true.

He was no longer 'Kagetora'—or at least, he was 'Ougi Takaya' now. It wasn't as if Naoe couldn't understand Haruie thinking of him as a different person even if they both knew that the two were one and the same.

(Is it wrong to make amends to this person called 'Ougi Takaya'?)

Was it not cowardice to do so to this person who was not Kagetora?

Should his reparations not be made to that Kagetora who had said that he would not forgive Naoe?

(But there is no one for me here now but him...)

To serve Ougi Takaya was the only thing that Naoe could do.

He was determined. That he would not let history repeat itself.

But he was apprehensive and unsettled. Because history might indeed repeat itself.

Was Naoe really capable of helping Takaya with his own mind in this state?

His cigarette went out, and he dropped his forehead into his hands.

Kokuryou would certainly be able to draw out a degree of Kagetora's <<powers>>. If he could control what he had now, it would be quite sufficient.

(But his autosuggestion will probably not be so easily dissolved...)

Even Takaya himself would not find it so simple.

But above all, for Naoe—

(I don't want it to be dissolved.)

Yes, such was his thought.

(I'm such a selfish bastard...), he cursed himself, but could not repudiate his true feelings.

It was doubtlessly true that Kagetora's mighty <<powers>> would be necessary to destroy the <<Yami-Sengoku >>.

Actually, Naoe didn't know if they could stand against it even with all of his <<power>>. They needed the <<powers>> of the former Kagetora. But he would not be able to use them to the fullest extent without recovering his memories.
"And are you okay with that? Kagetora will remember."

What Nagahide had said flashed through his mind.

"About you. About Minako."

Naoe's eyes fell as if in an attempt to endure the weight of those words.

Yes. Kagetora would remember. No, he had to remember. And Naoe

himself,

who had wanted to forget more than anyone, he himself would—

Kitazato Minako—

She who had understood them so well.

The woman whom Kageatora had loved above any other.

The woman who had been caught up in the fight against [Oda Nobunaga](#)

whom Kageatora had entrusted to Naoe that day thirty years ago. He had

commanded Naoe to protect her and take her to a place of safety away from the battle. That command had been proof of Kageatora's trust in him, despite his hatred.

A trust that he had betrayed.

For Kageatora, there could not have been any act more heinous.

"You alone I shall never forgive for all of eternity."

Those tortured memories came once more to life.

Minako, thin limbs flailing wildly.

Naoe, holding her down mercilessly and tearing off her clothes as she cried and screamed Kageatora's name—

She must have seen a beast's eyes looking down at her.

And he, who had transformed into that beast—

Whose name had his heart cried out?

A name that had only rent his heart apart.

When that cruel night turned into dawn—

*Next to Minako's naked body lying doll-like in its crumbled stillness,
his human heart had returned to him, and he had been able to feel only
surprise at his own atrocious, bestial actions. Shame and
self-aborrence had gouged out his heart in a place that could never
be
healed. And Minako had said only one thing to his crouched, cold back
pain deep in her eyes.*

*He had deserved any vile jeers or abuse she cared to throw at him. He,
who had violated her, had deserved 'he raped me' and any degree of
cruelty in retribution. Minako should not have been able to believe
him, whatever he did. She should have been stunned and terrified; she
should have detested him. And yet. And yet she. Minako.*

*His base treatment of Kagetora and Minako, this mistake that would
crush four hundred years in one night: she, knowing these things, had
been the one to save him.*

By saying but one small thing—

She had gazed at him out of a bodhisattva's hurt eyes.

But to this person who would have become his bodhisattva—

He...

He had delivered the final blow with that abominable act called 'kanshou'.

It was he who had forced them, these two who had so loved each other.

Why did it have to be Minako's lips which had spat out Kagetora's words

Who would the small life conceived within that body have been born into

Why had it turned out that way?

(Can I really start over?)

Thinking only such thoughts before this Kagetora who had lost his memories was unbearable. Yes, it was true. He, who made a pretense of

sorrow, felt only joy in the hidden depths of his heart that Kagetora had forgotten his shame.

Could Kagetora have given him this chance, though such selfishness tainted him?

Suddenly depressed once more, Naoe gazed out at the lonely lights along the street.

A black BMW passed him and rode up to the gates of Ueshima's

mansion.

A middle-aged man dressed in traditional Japanese clothes disembarked

along with several companions. They were warmly received and ushered

inside. They appeared to be Ueshima's guests.

Naoe leaned forward and turned up the volume of the receivers on his listening devices. There seemed to be a great deal of excitement and activity within the house.

(Who is his guest?)

A quick glance told him that he would not be able to make an accurate identification. But he felt as if he had seen the person somewhere before.

(Someone connected to the political world...?)

A conference began within the house. A few dozen minutes later—

"We are making steady progress on the capture of [Sendai](#) ."

Two men were speaking in the parlor. Sitting on a large [tatami](#) chair, Representative Ueshima—no, Sengoku general [Mogami Yoshiaki](#) —said to his middle-aged traditionally-dressed guest:

"The Date appear quite distracted, with thanks to thine Ashina forces.

At this rate we shall drive out Masamune's Date spirits ere we complete the <<[jike-kekka](#)>>."

"Indeed. Our onryou shall tear the souls of the Date apart and consign them to eternal

pain." His guest laughed haughtily. "Why, I shall not allow them to undergo purification. I will wipe out their beings and <<chain>> their spirits to serve as our minions. They will become our strength; we will use them to eradicate all threat in the Northeast and thereby kill two birds with one stone. It so appears that Date is not yet aware of the alliance between Mogami and Ashina."

"Moreover, the anti-Date alliance between Nanbu, Satake, Oosaki, Iwaki, and Souma is nearing its finalization. Once we have completed the snare, 'twill be child's play to deal with the Date. —I did not think to see this alliance of our former lives see the light of day in a place such as this."

Mogami Yoshiaki lifted a cup of sake to his lips. "Ashina-dono, bearest thou thy hatred for Date still?"

"How could I forget?" Ashina Moriuji spat. "We the Ashina, we who have been a noble house since the Kamakura Period , ruined so magnificently by Date. Nay, and one other: Satake's son should not have been adopted into the clan. Ashina was destroyed

because a man such as he became the head of the clan. The misfortune of

my house was a curse cast by Date and Satake. They plotted to conquer

Ashina. Yet "'this"' battle shall end differently. The resurrection of this 'Leader of the Golden Age' Ashina Moriuji will no longer allow

those novices to do as they wish. I will show them the true power of the Ashina."

"I leave it in thy hands, Ashina-dono. Thou shalt certainly take the head of Date's One-Eyed Dragon."

"I have no need for flattery."

"'Tis not flattery. I speak from my heart. And there is one task more I must ask of thee."



The two glared at each other for a moment.

With ever-guarded eyes.

"Think thou that I am taken in by thee?" [Ashina Moriuji](#) muttered, the middle-aged features of his spiritual vessel twisting. A sly smile appeared on Ueshima's angular face.

"Please take thine ease this evening."

(That was a surprise...)

Naoe, who had heard the entire conversation from the bugs he had planted within the house, was slightly stunned.

(Ashina and Mogami, working together...)

He had already heard reports of Ashina's revival, but had not imagined that an alliance had already been formed. And moreover, that they were

spreading a snare around the Date....

(They are truly planning to destroy Date...)

And the other thing he had caught...

(<<Jike-kekai >>...?)

The door suddenly slid open, and a number of men came out, among them the traditionally-dressed man from earlier—Ashina Moriuji , perhaps. Naoe strained his eyes in the darkness. A small, middle-aged man with a long narrow face and white hair.

(That man is...)

Naoe jerked, suddenly recognizing him.

(Isn't that Diet Representative Hirabayashi Mikio?)

Hirabayashi was the leader of the Hirabayashi Party, the political faction to which Ueshima belonged. A former Prime Minister and

certainly a powerful, influential voice within his party. And this was Ashina Moriuji 's vessel!

Given that connection, it was certainly not unusual for Hirabayashi and Ueshima to call on each other. But to possess people in such positions of political power, of all things... Certainly, Mogami's possession of Ueshima was not by chance, but Ashina making someone as prominent as

Hirabayashi his vessel...?

(What in the world are they plotting?)

As Hirabayashi's black BMW drove away into the darkness, a woman's voice came through his listening devices.

"Hath thy guest returned home?"

An attractive middle-aged woman appeared from the inner tatami room. Yoshiaki smirked as he turned.

"He returned quite early. I wonder if he thinks we have served him poison?"

"What, we perform such—"

Yoshiaki reclined against the tatami seat and took a long puff from his tobacco pipe.

"These vessels we inhibit are unbearable. Well. 'Tis true that they are but senile old fools, yet their powers are certainly more useful on a grand scale than unskilled <<power>>."

Smoke rose up to the aging ceiling.

"A power that allows one to move the world, hmm?"

"Three years have already passed since we were resurrected into this world. Now the groundwork has finally been laid."

"Mmm. It hath taken us much time to grasp the current state of affairs, but the world of man, it seems, changes not."

Yoshiaki sketched a circle in the air in front of him with the tip of his pipe.

"Money and influence. People would sell even their souls to protect themselves. Or in this case, their bodies."

"Fools."

"Yes. They are fools. They who have forgotten battle rot away under the weight of their own short-sighted selfishness. Government created by those who are rotten becomes rotten itself. Such is the way of things, Oyoshi."

The woman glared at Mogami Yoshiaki forcefully. "Aniue , dost thou truly wish to plunge this world into the chaos of war once more?"

"I do not desire war. I will not enter into war. I will not enter into war, but we have now obtained a power to move this world. That is why I took this spiritual vessel. For the Mogami."

His younger sister Yoshihime , who was also Masamune's mother, Ohigashi-no-Kata, narrowed unyielding eyes at her brother.

"If thou shouldst speak carelessly, it may reach his ears."

"Him, hmm?" Yoshiaki's eyes were full of amusement. "So even the Demon Princess of the Ouu is afraid of ""him""?"

Yoshihime 's

face stiffened as she gazed at her brother. "I fear him. I cannot think but that he is bringing about something terrible in this land of the Northeast."

"It becomes thee ill, Yoshi. In any case, how doth Kojirou? Once Sendai falls into our hands, I am thinking of entrusting Yamagata to him as my proxy. He is certainly not inferior to Masamune in mien. He will doubtlessly become a good commander."

"That is so."

Another voice coming from the direction of the tatami room interrupted their conversation. The two turned and saw that

unawares to them, a slender young man had been standing on the other

side of the paper sliding door. How long had he been listening in on their conversation?—Yoshiaki and Yoshihime 's

faces both paled in alarm, but the young man said in a lovely treble without heed to the conversation that had gone on before: "Be at ease,

Mogami-dono. Kojirou-dono of the Date is an excellent young warrior. We

are completely in understanding with each other. However, Mogami-dono.

There are rats in this room."

"Wh...!"

The young man walked over, smirking. He flipped up the scroll of a landscape painting hanging in the alcove.

"Ah!"

The young man smiled at Yoshiaki as he gasped.

"The ears of a large rat," the young man said, and crushed the tiny microphone of the bug he had revealed in his hand.

"A rat, there!"

"!"

The listening device cut off with a burst of static. Naoe had stripped off the receiver in the same instant, knowing that it foretold of disaster.

(They noticed...?!) He thought, when the car shook. Thud! He felt the car sink.

(What!)

The body of the car creaked loudly, enveloped by an unnatural power. A burning wind suddenly scorched the area around him. In that instant—

"!"

The Cefiro denoted in a column of fire with a terrible thunderous explosion.

"Don't run, you <<nue >>!"

The owner of that sharp voice came leaping over the fence along with a red-blazing fireball.

The Cefiro rumbled as it burned in towering crimson flames.

Naoe, who had managed to roll out of the car by the skin of his teeth, shuddered as he crouched on the ground with a hand pressed against his right shoulder.

(Is this their <<power>>?!)

Something howled behind him. He spun to see deep red flames opening a gigantic mouth in attack.

Naoe's <<nenpa >>

smashed the flames apart. Burning lumps blazing with festering human faces in their exact center appeared near him. Their too-large mouths split open as they advanced upon Naoe.

(They're <<kaki >>...!)

One flaming face attacked, fiery saliva splattering. He glared at it sharply and released his <<nenpa >>.

The face was torn to pieces with an ugly scream. But those pieces immediately joined together into one again and became its original

human face.

(What?!)

<<Kaki >> were clumps of pathos of those who had died in fires. They were a type of immaterial *tsukumogami* which invited disasters associated with fire. Since they were merely

leftover emotions, they should have scattered and disappeared when his

thought had blown them apart.

(They're no ordinary <<kaki >>!)

He warded off the next and the next attacking <<kaki >> with <<nenpa >>, but they merely scattered and coalesced back together into their original forms. It was an endless battle. Smashing yet another apart with <<nenpa >>, Naoe suddenly realized: Of course!

(They're not just clumps of emotion!)

They were <<nue >> clad in emotions—*onryou* !

(So <<choubuku >>!)

Naoe focused and gathered his <<power>>. All the

human-masked flames attacked simultaneously. Just as the flames were

about to engulf Naoe, he cried out sharply in a thundering roar:

bai!

The air froze. The <<kaki >>-clad *onryou* were completely paralyzed.

*"**Noumakusamanda bodanan baishiramandaya sowaka** !" Naoe yelled out!*

*"**Namu Tobatsu Bishamonten** ! For this demon subjugation, lend me thy power!"*

*He opened his hands, linked in the ceremonial gesture, in the direction of the <<**nue**>>.*

*"<<**Choubuku**>>!"*

*Light blazed from his hands. The white light tore apart the <<**nue**>> one after another. Their screams twined with the wind as they disappeared with the light.*

"!"

He felt a terrible deadly energy from directly behind him. An invisible arrow thudded into him as he whirled.

"Ugh!"

Will thrown like stones engulfed his entire body, and he fell to the asphalt

(Who...!)

*He concentrated <<**nenpa**>> into the palm of his hand. His misting eyes would not focus on his opponent.*

*But he could feel the incredible <<**aura**>>!*

(It's coming...!)

Someone's <<power>> attacked him from the area in front of him. Naoe promptly surrounded himself with a <<goshinha >>.

The two <<powers>> collided. Naoe pushed out his hands as he stretched his powers to the limit to hold the <<goshinheki >>. The air howled.

"...!"

Still holding the staggeringly heavy <<nenpa >> at bay with his <<goshinheki >>, Naoe stood. Then he summoned a <<nenpa >> with all his might.

"Gwaaaah!"
Boom boom boom...!"

A gigantic fissure tore the ground apart at Naoe's feet.

Naoe did not miss the moment his opponent faltered. He threw everything he had into a <<nenpa >>.

"!"

The deadly plasma bolt was deflected, and the trees and fence around him instantly went up in flames. A <<wall>> had evidently intercepted Naoe's <<nenpa >>. This was no average opponent!

(<<Power>> at this level—who...?!)

"Guh!"

A new arrival had struck from the virtually empty area behind him. An invisible chain coiled around him, driving deeper and deeper into his

body. He couldn't move. Agony!

(So there're two of them...?!)

It felt as if lightning were running through his entire body.

Naoe dropped silently.

And lay still.

Quiet returned to the lane. The garden's trees and fence continued to burn with the remnants of a flickering fire. After verifying that Naoe had indeed lost consciousness, *Mogami Yoshiaki* finally met up with his sister.

"A frightening individual. I would have been in danger without thine aid."

"*Aniue* . Who in the world..."

The young man of mixed blood from earlier walked up to meet Yoshiaki and Ohigashi-no-Kata from behind them. He peered at Naoe's still form and snorted with delighted laughter.

"Humph. I thought a large rat had crawled in from somewhere, and it turns out to be one of Uesugi's demons."

"! Uesugi?!"

The young man met Yoshiaki's glare with an innocent smile.

"This man is *Naoe Nobutsuna* , one of the Uesugi *kanshousha* . It appears that Uesugi's *Yasha-shuu* have now penetrated into the Northeast as well."

"Uesugi's... Yasha-shuu !"

"If such is the case, then they have probably also infiltrated Sendai . Well, so much the better. We shall probably find this man's <<power>> quite useful."

The young man smiled an angel's smile.

"I shall now depart, but I would like to present Mogami-dono with a modest gift."

"?"

"I would like to offer you an impenetrable cell for rat-caging. If you will allow me to assist in its making, your celebrated might should be more than sufficient for its maintenance—"

A slight smirk lifted his lips.

"The rat shall not be allowed to do anything within his cell.

Afterwards, Mogami-dono, you shall have the leisure to grill and drill him as you will."

"...!"

The young man's eyes lit with such cruelty that even the faces of the two Mogami stiffened. Ignoring their reactions, the young man snorted with laughter and looked at the remaining fires, soft silky hair waving in the breeze.

The fire reflected in Mori Ranmaru 's eyes glowed an eerie violet.

Chapter 7: Capture of the Demon Capital

When he regained consciousness, he found himself in a dark godown.

Dank, chill air. A musty smell in his nostrils. Moonlight flowing through a single tiny window set high in the wall.

Both of his arms hung suspended over his head. He looked up to see his wrists chained by manacles to a beam above him. He'd been captured it seemed.

(Trounced, huh?)

Clicking his tongue slightly, Naoe concentrated his will on breaking the shackles around his wrists. <<Nendouryoku >> should have easily cut through the cuffs, but—

(?)

There was no response.

Naoe looked up. There was nothing extraordinary about the chains. Naoe

focused his will once more. But he did not feel the shackles loosening. He couldn't feel anything happening at all. He impatiently changed his focus to a pile of boxes in front of him. He concentrated his will on breaking them, but the boxes didn't even quiver. Naoe was stunned.

He could no longer use his <<powers>>.

Had shock from the lightning done something to him? Or—was it something

else? Was something was absorbing his <<power>>, effecting pretty much the same outcome as a lack thereof? Then...!

(A <<kyuuryoku-kekkai >>?)

The unique barrier that Mori Ranmaru had used just recently in Matsumoto . It was not something that could be built without considerable power—impossible for anyone who was not a <<Yami-Sengoku >> onshou with first-class powers. Was there someone within the Mogami who had the ability to create this <<kyuuryoku-kekkai >>? Or could it be...

A horrible thought occurred to him.

(Could it be—Mori Ranmaru ?)

Naoe inhaled sharply.

(Which means—Oda is the one behind Mogami?)

If that was the case, then this battle was not just between Mogami and Date. If Oda had already approached the onshou of the Northeast, then it was clear as day that the Date were

outmatched in numbers. And Oda, using Mogami as a pretext for wiping

out Date, would probably then sideswipe Sendai .

Mogami and Ashina, who had possessed prominent politicians.

And Oda attaching himself to them like a shadow.

(This matter won't be resolved so simply.)

He struggled to free himself, but the chains held firm. He squirmed and thrashed in vain, succeeding only in digging the shackles deeper into his wrists. His frustration mounted.

(Goddammit...!) he groaned silently, gnashing his teeth. The sound of the heavy godown door sliding open startled him, and he looked in its direction. The warehouse's naked light bulb came on.

A young man appeared. He had an intelligent face and was about the same

age as Takaya. A glance was enough to show him the two souls within his

body.

(He's possessed?)

"Kojirou. The rat hath evidently awakened."

A woman's voice came from behind the young man. The next glance showed him a man and a woman, both middle-aged.

Naoe leveled a sharp glare at the three. The stern-looking woman was the first to speak.

"So thou art truly held immobile. Thou of the Uesugi. How dost thou feel to be captured?"

"__"

"A commander such as thee resorting to such poor ploys. If thou

shouldst wish to strike at thine enemy, thou shouldst do so openly."

"Sayest not so, Yoshi. The gathering of intelligence is, too, one of war's skills. 'Tis we who needs must be more aware of such devices. Well said the adage that the walls have ears," the well-built middle-aged man—Mogami Yoshiaki within Diet Representative Ueshima—said to soothe Yoshihime .

"Yet annoyed am I that he hath heard us."

"What are you bastards plotting?" Naoe demanded in a tightly-controlled voice. "What are you hoping to accomplish by possessing politicians like Ueshima and Hirabayashi?"

"Even if thou shouldst know, what then? What canst thou do with that information?"

Naoe choked down his retort as Yoshiaki came towards him.

"Thou canst do naught. Kanshousha thou art, yet kanshousha who cannot use their <<powers>> are no more than thus after all. Or wilt thou end thy own life here and steal some other body?"

"—"

"Marry, but we would capture thee before that should happen and with spirit-suggestion turn thee into one of our <<nue >>," Yoshiaki added, placing his hand on Naoe's chin. "The onshou of the <<Yami-Sengoku >> have heard much of Uesugi's Yasha-shuu . Your choubuku already hath sent Asano and Shibata to that other world, hath it not? I know not your purpose, but well are ye named the Yasha."

Naoe glared at Yoshiaki fiercely.

"Thou art called Naoe Nobutsuna ? The adopted brother of Uesugi Kagekatsu 's chief advisor, Naoe Kanetsugu ? We are much obliged to him. He was an even match for us in the Northeast Sekigahara , the Battle of Dewa .

Though he was our enemy, he did battle in splendid fashion. Fortunate was Kagekatsu-dono to have such a wise commander as his right arm."

There was a hawk's smile in Yoshiaki's eyes. "Yet 'tis not a name we much wish to hear."

"What are you planning to do with me?"

"'Twould be a simple matter to make you forget, but we have a use for thy <<power>>."

"Why don't you just spill it out? What are you bastards scheming? That bizarre set-up in Sendai is yours, isn't it? What is it for? What are you planning to do with Sendai ?"

Yoshiaki looked at Naoe contemptuously.

"So thou hast taken note? Ah, yes. If thou wouldst know, then I shall tell thee."

"Aniue !"

"It matters not, Yoshi. He shall not be allowed to return to his comrades."

"!"

Naoe's face stiffened. Looking at him, Yoshiaki stated quite composedly, "In these three years since we awoke from our eternal sleep, we have exerted a tremendous effort to examine the current form of the world. What we have seen, what we have heard, have wholly, shockingly passed beyond the limits of our language. People live in overflowing bounty. Goods multitudinous are made from neither ceramics nor iron, but from that unlike anything we have ever seen before. All technologies utilize fearful sorcery. The more we learn, the more we have come to see the magnificence of this society, a glorious reign we could never have imagined in the era in which we lived. Such a country I think, could not be subdued by less than the gods."

"__"

"I wished to know more of this world. For that purpose have I possessed assorted vessels, and learned much of this society in the span of three short years. Yet even afore I came to a deeper understanding of the structure of this world, I knew betimes this country was not the Pure Land of the gods."

True, it was a society in which people had gained equal, carefully-protected rights and guarantees. To even compare it to the world of the [Sengoku](#) , in which reality consisted of battles day after day, was foolish. 'Death' was far from the average lifestyle. Yet why would these people who should have recognized the intrinsic value of life be so buried

beneath its weight that they were able to see nothing else?

"'Tis an enormous animal, this society in existence today. It hath purpose and moves with our power. Why, then, do so many within the ranks of those who govern dance so closely to the whims of others that they cannot see the movement of their own feet?"

Yoshiaki's stern gaze was fixed in midair.

"If thou shouldst open the lid, thou wouldst see nothing save for a lust for endless pleasure. In this world where one can live at last without the constant shadow of 'death'...I wish not to think that this is its result."

Naoe stared at Yoshiaki.

Yoshiaki smiled at him faintly.

"The capital of this country is the former Edo—now called Tokyo, is't not?"

"?"

"All are currently focused in that capital, and methinks 'tis on the verge of explosion. There are those of the opinion that the capital should be changed."

(A plan to transfer the capital?)

It was a recent proposal vigorously championed by government intellectuals to remove the barriers placed on government

administration and finance by overcrowding resulting from the concentration of all government functions in Tokyo. Various opinions had been proffered, including the "transfer of the capital argument", which proposed moving the entire capital elsewhere, the "segmented capital argument", suggesting the transfer of capital functions into multiple districts, and the "new capital argument", advocating the relocation of only core institutions such as the National Diet—Yoshiaki appeared to be speaking of this.

"'Tis quite true that everything is too centered in that city; it shall soon become a city without a future. 'Tis a place festering with drifters and vagrants where change comes not, a place that sullies <<spirits>>. A government seated in such a place will pervert these peaceful times."

"!"

"Soon shall Tokyo be tossed away, and the capital immediately transferred. No one but we can bring about this change. We the Mogami

shall grasp the real power of the government and reshape the Japanese

islands to correct the distortion in this society with our own hands."

"Th...!"

Naoe was speechless. *Mogami Yoshiaki* continued, "And dost thou know the city most suitable for the new

capital? A city unlikely to fall prey to disaster and one with an

abundance of water and open land of low price, situated but an hour from Tokyo with transportation facilities such as we have now, a city with its own international airport: there exists but one city which fulfills these requirements—Sendai !"

"! Is that why—!"

Mogami Yoshiaki smiled calmly.

"Ay, that is why we will take Sendai . Once we have it, we will make it the new capital of this country. Yamagata shall become its new urban subcenter. Sendai hath sufficient foundation already as the center of the Northeast ; by its meed it can bear the transfer of the capital even if such should begin immediately."

*"So that's why—so that's why you've possessed Ueshima and the others
You're planning to use their political influence to make the transfer of the capital a reality!"*

Ambition gleamed in Yoshiaki's eyes.

"Why, yes. This man's origins in the Northeast shall work well to our advantage. He will gain even more power by promoting the transfer of the capital. The knowledge and power of our vessels will allow us to move Japan. Sendai is our castle. To make our castle the capital is to rule over all the country!"

"...!"

*"For that reason must I capture Sendai ,
oust Masamune and the Date and hold that city in the palm of my hand*

Six months and no more shall we require to make it the capital. We shall show its inhabitants their true master. The capital must be a place virtuous in both holiness and spirituality. I shall not show mercy to those onryou who oppose me!"

"Did you create the barrier in Sendai for the purification of the earth?"

"Yea, that as well, but more than that—" Yoshiaki's eyes narrowed.

"I will manipulate the consciousness of Sendai's inhabitants. There needs must be an unparalleled effort if the capital be transferred there. However influential one's position, the power of a few politicians cannot hope to sway public opinion. Located in Sendai are branch offices for most large enterprises. Many are assigned to positions there, forming a complete network connected to all parts of the country. For the sake of Mogami's country will I make every man, woman, and child mighty combatants in the battle for the transfer of the capital!"

"You're planning to brainwash them...?!"

"That is the purpose of the <<jike-kekkaï >>."

It was Yoshihime who so candidly replied from behind.

"The <<energies>> of both people and spirits within the barrier shall be artificially manipulated by us, and all shall be brainwashed at the same time. We shall imprint a suggestion upon the <<energy>> of the earth, the <<jike >>, to hypnotize a large number of people over a large area at once. Those are the foundations we build

even now in *Sendai* ."

"Are you bastards serious?!"

Yoshiaki snorted mockingly.

"Wherefore would we go to such lengths if we were not serious?"

"...!"

"This man called Ueshima consented to aid from me in a bargain for the murder of a bribe-giver. Marry, if I had made him my vessel before this, he would belike have demanded of me the position of the next Prime Minister."

"..."

"I have left the arrangements in *Sendai* to my son *Yoshiyasu* . He is limited as a commander, but he doth excel in spiritual abilities. He commands the '*kinrin no hou* '—*Dakiniten-hou* spells of hypnotic suggestion!"

(*Dakiniten-hou*!)

They were potent spells which used spirit foxes with the power to induce hypnotic suggestion, and there existed no spells more powerful for brainwashing on a large scale. Performed at full power, they could cast hypnotic suggestion on a city—or, in the worst case, even on a country!

Naoe clamped his jaws down hard. Yoshiaki seemed to be enjoying Naoe's vexation.

"Our foxes shall tear those who oppose us limb from limb, as they did that cullion earlier. Grind thy teeth as thou wishest. There is naught that thou canst do. We the Mogami shall take the <<Yami-Sengoku >> along with this world; I advise thee to stay still and watch."

"You..."

"This cellar lies within a <<kyuuryoku-kekkaai >>. Date Kojiro here shall maintain the barrier. No hope hast thou of equaling his powers; therefore abandon all dreams of escape."

Naoe stared at the youth in shock. The young man looked down at the ground silently.

(He's Date Kojiro ...?)

*"Well and good. Eventually thou shalt join us in capturing Sendai ,"
Yoshiaki said with a sinister smile. "Thou shalt be made one of our commanders."*



Laughing loudly, Yoshiaki pressed Yoshihime and Kojirou out of the godown. As he left, Naoe had the feeling that Kojirou had wanted to say something, but...

Darkness returned to the cellar.

Naoe was dumbfounded.

They were planning to slip into the nucleus of the current country, to seize real power within the current government and control the country.

Rather than entering the <<Yami-Sengoku >>

to fulfill the unsatisfied ambitions of their previous lives, they wished to do so by ruling this modern society of four hundred years later.

(What foolishness...)

The process of brainwashing the residents of *Sendai* en masse would probably begin immediately upon completion of the barrier. They would worship *Mogami Yoshiaki* as their lord without even being conscious that anything was amiss,

exactly as he had said. They would kill or rampage or unquestioningly do whatever else he asked for the transfer of the capital. If he should expand his reach by using more spiritual vessels possessed by *onryou*—

(If we're not careful, all of Japan will fall into Mogami's hands!)

They could not allow such idiocy to take place. The takeover of the country by four-hundred-year-old *onryou* would be no joke. They had to prevent the <<*Yami-Sengoku*>> from surfacing into the outer world at any cost!

He strained with all his might to free himself from the manacles, but it was no use at all. Still he continued to struggle. His wrists were rubbed raw, but he didn't stop. He had to escape. If he didn't warn the others—

(What should I do...!)

Naoe cried out in his mind—

(Kagetora-sama!)

Someone had observed the entire sequence of events from the thick shrubbery at the back of the godown.

Mori Ranmaru smiled coldly and murmured, "It's getting interesting."

He turned on his heels. The moonlight shining upon his skin lent it an even paler cast.

This moonlit night in Dewa Yamagata , pregnant with malevolence, was ominously chill.

She had not heard from Naoe in two days.

Ayako had gotten increasingly worried. On the night Takaya returned from Masamune's mansion, Ayako finally gave in to her disquiet and entered Yamagata on a probe. Her face paled to a ghastly shade of white when she heard the disturbance over what looked like Naoe's Cefiro mysteriously exploding in a residential district within Yamagata City .

It was almost a certainty that something had happened to Naoe.

But Ayako could not abandon her own responsibilities to search for him.

She had become aware of Mogami's barrier, and for the time being had poured all her effort into dispersing the spirits who were drawn to the 'platforms'. Even choubuku was not enough; the scattered spirits soon gathered again, and she could only keep doing the same thing over and over again. To make matters worse, souls were not the only things attracted to the sites; tsukumogami capable of forming monstrous soul clumps were also pulled in.

Though she asked, Kagetora still gave no sign at all of regaining his <<powers>>, and Ayako exhausted herself holding the spirits at bay alone.

Unable to stand by, Kokuryou exclaimed, "If you're tired, I'll help you starting from tomorrow."

"Ah...it's okay. I'm fine."

"If you push yourself too hard you'll poison your body."

Kokuryou sat down in the [tatami](#) room and poured barley tea.

"You should call upon your remaining colleague."

"No! No way! I can't do that!"

Kokuryou looked askance at Ayako's adamant refusal.

Ayako said irritably, "I can't manage a selfish, capricious guy like Nagahide. So don't tell me to ask him for help!"

"You do not have a strong position to stand on. Even through this show o vanity you know as well as I that it can't be helped."

Ayako, thoroughly exposed, had no reply. She sulked. "... I'll give it one try."

"Well, since you have scattered the spirits, the power gathering at the barrier point has been checked and the curse impeded. The curse itself

does not seem to be working with its power-source dispersed."

"It looks like the curse uses the power of spirits as its energy source. So it must be fragmented?"

The <<jike-kekkaï >> currently erected around Sendai was a type of curse-barrier (a barrier used to actualize some special effect), also called a hypnotic barrier . It could brainwash the people enclosed within by manipulating the <<jike >>, but a spiritual sensing had told them that the actual scope of the barrier was four or five

times larger; somehow by means of the 'platforms' at the center of Sendai this circular barrier itself served as a 'platform' for <<jike >>-manipulation.

Ayako muttered grimly, "If it was really Date who made contact with Kagetora, then I think we can believe that the master of the barrier is Mogami. The Date are entirely on the defensive, and there are signs that they're working to prevent the invocations of the dead. But then again, since they know that we're making our own moves, I don't know if they're just playing least-in-sight for now or something."

"Did Date allow that young monk to go without knowing his true identity?"

"That's...probably right. What I'm worried about is that Kagetora said he met Kousaka, too."

Kokuryou's eyebrows drew together.

"Kousaka Danjou of the Takeda? The general who was master of Kaidu Castle at Kawanakajima ?

It really does give one a strange feeling. Well, to claim that we are living at the same time as Lord Masamune is also an extraordinary

story. If I didn't know any of this, I would truly have loved to chat with him just once."

"Kousaka should've totally recognized the <<jike-kekkaai >> curse a long time ago. But I don't know what he's planning to do about it..." Ayako's tone grew more emphatic. "Anyway, we have to find a way to dispel it. On its own, my power is not enough to neutralize the curse. If only Kagetora could use his <<powers>> like that time in Matsumoto ..."

She trailed off and cast a glance at the inner chambers where Takaya evidently was. Kokuryou folded his arms in deep thought.

"So that young monk's mother lives in Sendai ... It's understandable that he is troubled," Kokuryou, whose aid Naoe had solicited, mused. "Well then. Let's see if I can put in a word."

Takaya was in the main temple building.

He was gazing up absently at the statue of Dainichi Nyorai seated on the altar, absorbed in solitary thought.

Mom... That word, breathed in silence in the space of his mind, would not reach Sawako. The Sawako who, catching sight of the son who should have been in Matsumoto, had run up to him in shock and bewilderment.

"When did you get here? I would have come to see you if you'd told me."

"..."

Takaya didn't respond. A slight, quiet smile of relief had lit Sawako's round face upon seeing her transformed, full-grown son.

"You look great."

Sawako gazed wistfully up at Takaya. The difference in their heights meant that he now had to look down at her, and he was startled again, staring at the bun at the back of her head, to notice his own height for the first time.

He had never realized before that his mother was such a tiny person...

But that smile was, without a doubt, Sawako's. It had not changed at all. It was the same smile he had seen as a little boy in that moss rose garden.

"Is Miya also doing well? She must be a second-year junior high student now. I wonder if she would like being an older sister?"

Takaya gazed at Sawako silently.

"Let me hear your voice, Takaya."

His name from his mother's lips. Said in that way so unlike anyone else's, the way which belonged to her alone, the way no other person could: more tenderly, more gently, and...

"Takaya?"

Takaya's fists clenched. The puzzled child at Sawako's side tugged at he

clothes.

"Mom, who's that?"

Taken aback, Sawako shifted her gaze from Takaya to the child.

"Shunsuke. This young man is..."

"Nobody you know."

Sawako stared blankly at Takaya. Ayako and Kokuryou looked at Takaya in surprise as well.

"I'm just someone passing by. We're complete strangers. We don't know each other at all."

"Takaya..."

"You're the one who cut ties with us. You're the one who ran away by yourself."

"!"

Her son's words pierced her chest.

Takaya couldn't quite believe the idiotic things coming out of his mouth either, but the words just slipped out.

"What are you making such a fuss over? It's not like I came here to see you or anything. You don't have to pretend. You're actually pretty annoyed, aren't you? Even though you're smiling, you're really thinking: what the hell is he doing here? You don't want to look at the child you threw away, do you?"

Ayako tugged at his arm warningly, but—

"Because I'm the son of that good-for-nothing who made you so unhappy!" Takaya flung at her, and turned to walk into the crowd of passersby without looking back. Ayako followed him, but.

Takaya plowed into the counter-flow of pedestrians, feeling Sawako's hurt eyes on his back.

He was the one making a fuss.

Why had he said those things? Even though he truly didn't feel bitter towards Sawako...

He hadn't thought of himself as being abandoned by her. She had endured

enough. She had borne enough, so he didn't blame her for running away.

He couldn't condemn her.

No one could rob her of her right to be happy. Not even the son of her own flesh and blood.

(I understand...)

He understood, so why had he blurted out those things?

(What right do I have to blame her at all at this late date!)

Sitting cross-legged on the [tatami](#) mats in the main temple, Takaya looked up at the ceiling.

He should have been glad to see his mother's happy face. How could a child wish for anything other than happiness for his own mother?

(I'm nothing but a brat.)

Just a stupid brat, Takaya thought, and sighed deeply.

(And if I were Kage-tora?)

"A wonderful moonlit night, is it not?"

He turned in surprise at the voice. The door slid open, and Kokuryou appeared.

"Look. The moon is just above the persimmon trees. Sendai's Festival of the Weaver is approaching."

Takaya glared at Kokuryou fiercely.

"Did you come to preach at me?"

"You appear to have taken up susokukan . Well done, well done. Have you been able to converse a little with your inner universe?"

"As if I could do something like that. I'm not a Taoist mountain sage or anything."

"That is where you do not give yourself enough credit. You do not yet seem to have realized your own power, have you?"

"?"

Kokuryou walked heavily over and pressed his hands together in front of

"The Power of Virtue, you see, is what we call the power that a pilgrim equips to complete a journey. It is complement to the Power of Prayer, which is the divine protection of the Buddhas. The power of the Buddhas and your power, and power from all dimensions contained therein, are inseparably attached to one another; this power, the Power of the Universe, when acting in mutual balance, gives rise to the great Power of the Divine. Yet, though you have not completed any journey, you seem already equipped with this Power of Virtue."

Takaya frowned attentively.

"Shall we speak of the other you? That being carries the great Power of Virtue, and lies concealed deep within your soul. If you wish to draw it out, then you should be able to do so. But you are shutting it out."

"I'm not shutting it out!" Takaya retorted angrily. "I am trying to draw it out. But I can't even use it at the crucial moment. It's not my fault! Kagetora's the one who's blocking me from using it!"

"No, it's you, Ougi Takaya!"

The words slammed into Takaya, stunning him.

"I will allow for your inexperience, but you have sealed your own powers. Because you pretend to perceive, yet turn your eyes away from

your own heart. Because you pretend to understand without truly understanding! That is why you hurt those you do not need to hurt. Those who truly understand do not injure others so carelessly. You only pretend to know yourself. In truth you understand nothing. You know not one thing!"

"So I'm just a kid! So I don't understand anything, so what!"

"I wouldn't know about that! You're convinced that you know yourself, and since that satisfies you, you forgive yourself for your failings. You behave like a spoiled child! You misconstrue yourself more and more to do so. When you truly know yourself, you would not find it so easy to simply forgive yourself!"

"Shut up!" Takaya yelled, the sound echoing within the temple. "How the hell would I know?! I don't give a damn about not knowing! The real me or whatever...if I knew that, I would... What the hell are you saying I should do?!"

The crease disappeared from between Kokuryou's brows. Takaya seemed to have layered additional meaning onto his words.

"Are you saying that Kagetora is the real me? That Kagetora is wearing Ougi Takaya's face? That I'm not myself? I don't have the memories so matter how much I try to call them up!"

"You have given me a chance."

"I can't be a substitute for Kagetora. It's impossible—it's impossible for me to carry their four hundred years on my shoulders!"

"Young monk..."

Takaya bowed his head, shoulders trembling. Kokuryou gazed at Tayaka's clenched fists.

Seeing his mother again seemed to have broken something within him. All that he had kept bottled up within him was spilling out.

"Because I...I'm not her son—..." he muttered, the words wrung out of him. "I'm a stranger who stole her son's body. The 'parents' of kanshousha change again and again—anyone's fine as long as they can take another body. Even though the parents unquestioningly give birth to what they think are their children."

"..."

"We're the ones who betray them. We're the ones who lie to them..."

Takaya moaned. "'I'm sorry' or 'I'm sorry for leaving you, forgive me'—I have no right to want an apology from her. No right at all!"

Kokuryou's eyes widened.

"I'm the one who should apologize... Because I'm the one who's deceived her since she gave birth to me! But then why do I feel like this! Why does it have to hurt so much! Why did you have to leave us and go looking for only your own happiness...! Why do I feel so bitter towards my own mother!"

"Young monk..."

Takaya bit his lips hard. He drew in thin breaths, fists clenched against these unbearable thoughts, face twisted with distress.

"If there's nothing I can do but admit to being Kagetora. If there's nothing I can do but become Kagetora for their sake... Then I'll do it."

"..."

"But instead I'll probably become just another stranger to my mom, won't I?"

His shoulders trembled.

"At least...if I had Kagetora's memories... I probably won't have to feel like this..." he muttered, and shut his eyes tightly. Kokuryou, looking at Takaya, closed his mouth.

The moon hung above the persimmon trees.

A cool wind rose.

(Uesugi Kagetora ...)

In the shadows of the garden the woman from last night kept watch on the two in the main temple.

(Hah, so that's the Uesugi Yasha-shuu that Father spoke of...) the woman snickered unpleasantly, controlled by a consciousness not her own.

(If I stop him, then even Father must admit my qualifications as a general.)

Mogami Yoshiyasu , the spirit in possession of the body, bared his teeth at *Uesugi Kagetora* .

Chapter 8: Dance of the Spirit Foxes

"Narita-kun Narita-kun Narita-kuuuuuun!!"

On the street along Matsumoto's Parco , Yuzuru turned as a shrill voice suddenly called his name. Morino Saori, dressed in casual clothes, came galloping towards him.

It was the Sunday after final exams in [Matsumoto City](#) .

Narita Yuzuru smiled cheerfully.

"Oh, Morino-san. Hi!"

"Wh-wh-wh-what a coincidence, Narita-kun! Are you out shopping? Going to the bookstore? Or maybe the arcade?"

"I heard that there's a new CD out, so I came to take a look. How about you?"

"I was applying for a part-time job. I thought I'd try the Mister Donut over there, but they said they've already found someone. Argh—... dammit...!"

Saori aimed a kick in the direction of the restaurant before remembering Yuzuru and hurriedly straightening.

"Aaaah, anyway, can I come with you? I wanted-I wanted to see the CD too!"

"Sure!" Yuzuru agreed brightly. "I'd like to take a look at some musical instruments too, so would it be okay if we walked towards Mair Street?"

Saori, looking as if she would gladly follow Yuzuru anywhere, nodded rigorously.

The two set out down the street side by side.

Saori cast a strangely blissful gaze on the pedestrians going in the opposite direction.

(Oh no oh no! I wonder if they think I'm Narita-kun's girlfriend...?)

She stole quick glances at Yuzuru's left arm, thinking, (It'd be—it'd be sooo perfect if I could take his arm.)

Saori's breathing quickened. Feeling the odd high-spirited vibes coming from beside him, Yuzuru involuntarily turned.

"Wh-what is it?"

"Eh? Ah, ahahah. It's nothing."

She quickly waved her hand in dismissal, but her face kept breaking out into a smile.

All the passersby were taking notice of them.

(Look, look! They all think we make a great couple!)

Actually, it was only because the expression on Saori's face was rather creepy.

"Morino-san, so you work part-time?"

"Oh, not yet, but I thought I would during summer vacation. If I can save

up some money, I can go visit Yuiko-chan in Tokyo."

"Yuiko? ...you mean, the girl from the other day?"

"Yup. We're writing to each other. Yuiko-chan is a fan of Ougi-kun's, you know. I can't believe she likes a pushy guy like him. I sorta groaned when I heard that..."

"Ah, but he's really popular, you know. I lost count of how much chocolate he got on Valentine's Day."

"Urgh, no way! Wh-what about what about you?"

Yuzuru grinned without answering. "At first I thought you liked Takaya too but maybe I'm wrong?"

Saori was totally stunned. Those words coming out of Yuzuru's mouth...

"N-no I don't! The person I like is the person I like is...!"

"Is it okay for you to tell me?"

Stunned again, Saori lost all her nerve.

(My feelings haven't reached him at all, I guess.)

But was it really true that Yuzuru hadn't noticed? If so, then he was beyond oblivious...

(Though I really like that ♥...)

Blushing, Saori looked quickly up at Yuzuru.

"How about you? Do you have anyone you like?"

"Eh? Of course. I like everyone."

Saori gave him a blank look.

"...I mean, there's not really anyone that I hate. Is that weird?"

There're people who have faults, and there're people who irritate me, but I don't think there's anyone that I really hate."

Yuzuru didn't appear to be talking about the same subject.

"I feel really fortunate to have the people around me that I do. I've been called the guy who's everybody's friend."

"Everybody's friend? Who called you that?"

"Takaya."

Unforgivable! Saori thought with annoyance. Fists clenched, she was prepared to go for a surprise attack when she remembered—Oh right...

"What's up with Ougi-kun? He even skipped out on the exams—is he okay?"

"Ah...yeah."

The phone call from Takaya had reassured Yuzuru that he was all right, but he hadn't learned much about what Takaya was doing or where he was.

Though he had the general sense that Takaya had gotten caught up in whatever Naoe and the others were doing.

But...

"What in the world has he been dragged into?" Yuzuru came to a stop in front of the crosswalk. He murmured haltingly, "Isn't there—any way that I can help him?"

Saori looked up at Yuzuru seriously. "Narita-kun..."

"It was when I got possessed by Takeda Shingen that all these weird things started happening to Takaya. He's been dragged into all this strangeness just because of that. That power...I don't know why he can do things like that, but I know that he's changing right in front of my eyes. I know that his senses have grown sharper and sharper since then. Even though he's probably not aware of it himself..."

"—"

"Before, Takaya had almost no sensitivity to spirits, but now he's probably more sensitive to them than I am." Yuzuru smiled a little. "I guess it really doesn't have anything to do with me, and Takaya probably wouldn't want me to stick my nose into it either. But I—" Yuzuru's eyes fell quietly. "I'm worried about him..."

The signal turned green. But Yuzuru didn't move.

"I want to help him, but I don't know what I could do. I don't have anything like the power that he has, so I probably can't do anything for him anyway, but I'm uneasy when he's not around. At least, I'm not

this anxious when he's where I can keep an eye on him. ...That idiot..."

"Narita-kun..."

Yuzuru bit his lips, pain in his downcast eyes. His gallantry was irresistible, and Saori gave in to her sudden impulse to hug him. Yuzuru closed his eyes for a moment, then smiled at her.

"Sorry. I should stop whining, shouldn't I?"

"Ah, you're not..."

"Oh, the light."

Yuzuru walked forward. Saori rushed to catch up.

"Narita-kun!"

"?"

"When...when you're feeling..." Saori cried after him, "when you're feeling sad, don't keep it all bottled up! I'm an idiot, so I probably won't be able to help you or anything, but I can listen to you. I'll listen any time you want!"

Saori's words, though trite, came from the heart, and Yuzuru smiled gently.

"Thank you."

The sudden blare of a car horn stopped them just as they were about to enter the instrument shop.

"Huh?"

They turned to see a gungray metallic Leopard parked next to them and someone familiar waving at them from the window.

Yuzuru exclaimed, "Chiaki!"

"Yo!"

It was Chiaki Shuuhei—[Yasuda Nagahide](#) . Yuzuru and Saori ran up to the car in surprise.

"Wh-what's with the car?! Should you be driving? Do you even have a license?"

"What, you didn't know? I'm nineteen."

"Kyaaaah, Chiaki-kun! A Leopard, a Leopard! You're like [Shibata Kyouhei](#) or something! Does it belong to your parents? Or is it yours?"

Yuzuru was dumbfounded. Apparently for Saori the fashion freak, having a license didn't matter as long as the car was a good one.

"But it'd be bad if you got found out at school."

"Doesn't matter. Anyway, Narita. I came to pick you up."

"Huh?"

Yuzuru and Saori both blinked. Chiaki jerked his thumb in the direction of the car.

"We're eloping, Narita-kun."

Ack! The two retreated. Chiaki pointed at the huge bag on the back seat.

"See? I've already brought the luggage. Hurry up and get in."

"Wh-wh-what the heck? And that! You got that from my house?"

"Yup."

"What—you—wait just one minute! What the heck are you thinking?!"

"And here I was all ecstatic, too."

"Argh, look!"

Saori was clamoring happily in the background. Yuzuru looked at Chiaki wearily.

"So where are we going?"

"Sendai ."



Seriousness abruptly returned to Yuzuru's face.

"Sendai?"

"There's somebody who grumbles and whines too much when you're no around."

"Grumbles and whines? You don't mean—"

"So hurry up and get in."

Chiaki dragged Yuzuru to the car by the arm and shoved him inside. Saori panicked.

"Ah, wait, Chiaki-kun! You're not—are you really going to take Narita-kun?"

"Sorry, but lemme borrow him for a bit."

"Th-that's not fair! I want to go I want to go I want to go too! Take me with you!"

"Sorry, see you," Chiaki said, and his Leopard sprinted off with Yuzuru inside.

"Wa-wait! Chiaki-kuuuun!" Saori, left behind on the sidewalk by herself, stared after them blankly. "Aaack. Narita-kun got kidnapped by Chiaki-kun..."

She pressed her hands together in involuntarily seriousness and said to the sky, "Oh God. Please don't let my Narita-kun get AIDS..."

*"Wa-wait! You're not really planning to drive to **Sendai** from here, are you?"*

"Sure I am."

"No way. But I...!"

Chiaki give Yuzuru on the passenger's seat beside him a quick glance and said quietly, "Don't worry about your family. I've given them the proper suggestion. I'll do something about school, too."

*"Are we going to meet Takaya in **Sendai** ?"*

Chiaki nodded. "That idiot. He's not really being difficult, but he can't use his <<powers>> at all right now. He's not much use as he is, so I was told to go and help."

"... What should I...what should I do?"

"—"

Chiaki replied after a moment of silence. "Just be by Ougi Takaya's side. You're probably the only key to awakening him. If my guess is right, he doesn't want to use his <<powers>> for anybody but you."

"? What do you mean?"

*Chiaki was silent. He didn't think that it'd been coincidence that Kagetora had performed **kanshou** so near Narita Yuzuru. Had Kagetora done so*

intentionally? In other words—

(Can it be that Kagetora knew Narita's true identity before he sealed his memories?)

That was how he saw it. That was why Takaya's <<powers>> could manifest themselves so easily when it came to Yuzuru. If he had imprinted the command on himself to open the doors to his <<powers>> only when he was protecting Yuzuru—wouldn't that also explain why they were so unstable?

When Chiaki didn't respond, Yuzuru glared at him fiercely. "... Are you planning to use me to make him do something?"

"Something like that, I guess."

Yuzuru asked the poker-faced Chiaki, not bothering to hide his distrust, "What the heck are you guys?"

A smile curved the corners of Chiaki's mouth. "You really wanna know?"

"Tell me what's going on around him. What is that power? Takeda Shingen and Mori Ranmaru. What's happening?"

Chiaki said, spinning the wheel left, "If I tell you, will you help us?"

"Me? Why me?"

"Because you're probably the most dangerous of them all."

Yuzuru had no idea what he was talking about. He peered at Chiaki dubiously.

Chiaki repeated, "I can't set you loose until I know why Kagetora would go so far to protect you. Here's the deal, Narita. You help us. You don't give a hand to anybody else. If you swear that, I'll tell you."

"? I don't really understand what you're saying, but..." Yuzuru said simply "I'm Takaya's friend. I'm on his side."

"..."

Chiaki turned his gaze forward again and muttered after a moment of silence, "You guys are really something."

"?"

"Why do you accept each other so totally and completely? It's very commendable."

"I guess so."

"You're not really thinking about this at all."

"I don't know anything, so I can't really be on anyone's side. And I don't think about it when Takaya's involved. Anyway, you're going to tell me, right? About you guys and Takaya."

"...Yeah. If you'll swear," Chiaki nodded seriously. "It's gonna be a long drive to [Sendai](#) . I'll talk 'til you're satisfied, Narita Yuzuru."

The car headed straight for the Matsumoto Interchange .

Meanwhile, back on the [Sendai](#) stage, at the sleeping [Jikou Temple](#) on the same day at dawn...

Ayako had set out by herself to stand watch at the university barrier point that day, leaving Takaya behind to get some rest. Successfully defending even that single spot meant that the barrier could not be completed, so Ayako had thought it better to leave Takaya out of it, since he was still unable to use his <<powers>>. She was determined to hold up until Nagahide, whom she had called for help, could get there.

But there was someone targeting the powerless Takaya: the woman he had confronted at the collapse site last night.

She had thought to creep into the premises to catch him sleeping, but a voice suddenly spoke from behind her.

"You behave like a thief in the night, Lordling."

"!"

The woman whirled with inordinate surprise. Behind her stood a man whose presence she had not sensed.

"I don't suppose you're here for a night visit to see your sweetheart?"

It was [Kousaka Danjou](#) .

White coat flapping, Kousaka walked towards the woman.

"So you're [Mogami Yoshiaki](#) 's son, [Mogami Yoshiyasu](#) ? You were killed

on the road to exile at *Mount Kouya* in your previous life, weren't you?"

The woman glared at Kousaka with naked hostility.

"Who are you?"

A slight smile curved Kousaka's lips.

"Someone who declines to leave his name. I've only come to see the arrogant, foolish general try to take on *Uesugi Kagetora* over there."

"...!"

A pale shimmering haze rose from the woman's body. Hostility transformed into murderous intent, and the air around her became ominously stifling.

"*On dakini sanhaharakyatei sowaka .*"

"!"

As the woman chanted, a pale spherical light surrounded her.

"*On kiri kaku un sowaka .*"

The pale light took on the shape of animals dancing in the darkness—animals that looked like foxes...!

(The mantra of *Dakini* ...! Are '*koko* ' being used?!)

"*On kiri kaku un sowaka !*"

The woman formed the *mudra* of *Dakini* with her hands, chanting loudly. The dancing '*koko* ' snarled at Kousaka and attacked.

"Mumph!"

Kousaka released a <<nenpa >>. A few of the 'koko '

wrenched their spirit bodies away and turned in midair between the two combatants, swinging their tails of light. The woman didn't pause in her attack.

"On kiri kaku un sowaka !"

The 'koko '

charged again, baring their teeth to tear Kousaka's arm apart. Kousaka poured out his will as he dodged. His conjured bullets slammed mercilessly into the 'koko ', but these spirit beings could not be finished off so easily without Uesugi's <<choubuku >>.

"Feh!"

He met the endless charges of the 'koko', but one slipped through a break in his <<nenpa >> to snap at him, tearing his coat and sinking its teeth into his shoulder.

"Ugh!"

He gathered <<power>> into the palm of his hand and threw it into the 'koko ' at his shoulder, sending it flying. Still they continued to snap at his flank—and then they charged, aiming for his throat!

(You...!)

Serious now, he released a <<nenpa >> that scattered the 'koko ' in all directions. Bloodlust tinted Kousaka's eyes.

BAM!

<<Nenpa >> exploded, slamming all the 'koko ' still snapping at him to the ground. His hands formed the symbolic gesture of Dainichi Nyorai in counterattack.

"On abokyabeiroshanau makabodara manihandoma jinbaraharabaritaya un !"

"What!"

The aura of rage surrounding the 'koko '

instantly faded, and Kousaka took the opening. Before the woman could

rush to continue her mantra, Kousaka threw everything he had into a <<nenpa >> and sent it flying at her.

"Gyaaah!"

The woman somersaulted through the air and hit the asphalt with a

strange scream. The foxes, deprived of their energy source, disappeared

at the same time.

"Ugh..."

Kousaka walked towards the woman with a hand pressed against the ragged wound at his shoulder. Mogami Yoshiyasu moaned with pain. Eyes glinting, Kousaka sneered, "Humph. So the Koumyou Shingon is indeed omnipotent. Its power is impressive even when used by one such as I. Or should I say—perhaps the problem lies with the

curse-caster."

He lifted the woman's chin.

"Even if you are using 'koko', your power does not yet appear to be equal to the task of killing a kanshousha, Lordling."

Yoshiyasu glared at him with resentment.

Kousaka's gaze sharpened, and his smile disappeared.

"The usage of Dakiniten-hou means... that as I expected, the curse-barrier around Sendai is a <<jike-kekkaai >> using 'kinrin no hou', hmm? It's quite interesting that the kinrin no hou, performed at Tou-ji at the Emperor's enthronement in the ceremony of kanchou for his royal protection, has spells of hypnotic suggestion at its

core. Which means that it's a spell that grasps peoples' hearts, I suppose?"

Dakiniten, who was also said to be a fox spirit, could foresee a person's death around six months in advance and was a terrifying yasha who devoured the bodies of the dead. Those who worshipped her gained extraordinary powers. The incantations of Dakiniten (goddess of foxes) were also among the most potent of spells, and from

time to time those with influence or power would label these 'most secret of secret spells' the 'black arts' to absolutely prohibit their usage by any save themselves.

According to the 'Chronicles of Tranquility', the emperor Go-Daigo had personally studied the kinrin no hou, a spell with Dakiniten-hou at its heart, and placed a curse on the Bakufu of the Kamakura Shogunate.

It was also said that the spirit foxes used by Dakiniten-hou had the power

of hypnotic suggestion and manipulation over peoples'

<<energies>> (apparently the origin of the phrase 'deceived by a fox'); Mogami was evidently making use of this special quality.

Mogami Yoshiaki was using invocations of the dead to gather spirits to serve as the

energy source of the small barrier erected at the center of Sendai , and then leveraging mastery of the kinrin no hou to cast a curse from within the large barrier erected upon the

'platform' formed from the small barrier. He would then be able to manipulate the <<jike >> with Dakiniten 's magical power by using fox spirits (shikigami).

"Hmm. The onshou of the <<Yami-Sengoku >>

have laid their schemes very nicely indeed. I had thought that they were incapable of anything but fighting, but this one is rather skillfully done." Kousaka Danjou smiled faintly. "Did you come to kill Uesugi Kagetora ? Heh. What a reckless fellow you are, to attack Uesugi's Yasha-shuu with your level of power. Those 'koko ' of yours. They would be destroyed in the blink of an eye in their <<choubuku >>.

"...!"

As the woman's face stiffened, Kousaka added, "Are you afraid of their power? Are you afraid of being sent to that other world? What makes you

cling to this world with such tenacity? Revenge on the father who exiled you in your previous life?"

"Shut up!" Yoshiyasu shouted. "I only want to have my father

acknowledge me. If I should succeed him as head of the clan, I only wish to bring peace and security to Mogami and be recognized!"

"The assassins who killed you were sent by your father, did you know that? Do you not think that, after being alienated and murdered, you're still just being used now that you've been resurrected?"



"Shut up shut up!" Yoshiyasu wrenched violently away. "When I succeed in the mass-brainwashing of [Sendai](#) , Father will certainly look at me in a new light. Then he'll regret having attacked me!"

"Humph. What stupidity." Kousaka snorted a laugh and released Yoshiyasu. "With the level of [Dakiniten-hou](#) you have at your command, there's no reason for you to hand [Sendai](#) over to your father."

"!"

Kousaka smiled charmingly. "Have you never wanted to rule?"

"Wh...!"

Kousaka said to the speechless Yoshiyasu, "In this <<Yami-Sengoku >>, those with strong spiritual powers will win. You don't have to carry these burdens any further—you needn't just helplessly surrender Sendai to your father, do you? If you wanted, you could use Sendai as a pretext to attack Mogami Yoshiaki ."

"Y-you bastard! Are you from the Date?!"

There was malice in Kousaka's eyes as he smiled innocently.

"Heh. Well, in any case, your mass-brainwashing will not succeed. It looks like Uesugi's Yasha-shuu have you by the tail. Once they're involved, it'll only be a matter of time before you're smashed to pieces."

Yoshiyasu's breath caught.

"After all, they received the power of onryou -extermination from Lord Uesugi Kenshin , God of War. They also once fought Oda Nobunaga to a standstill."

"! Fought Lord Oda to a standstill!"

"Some big shots have already been eliminated. Well, I guess it would not be so simple for mere onshou to take their heads."

"Wa-wait, will I fail as well? Can I not destroy them with my power?"

Kousaka stood. "It would be difficult with your level of <<power>>."

"I-I must destroy them at any cost. I must accomplish Father's

commands. If I cannot do that, I will disappoint him again, and he'll just write me off this time as well."

"That does not concern me."

"Wait a minute. Wait! You're kanshousha , aren't you? You're stronger than I am. You've shown me your skill and your considerable <<powers>>. Let's make a deal! You want me to do something for you, don't you? I'll listen. I'll listen, so don't go yet."

Kousaka paused and half-turned, waiting. "Will you hear my request?"

"I will. What is it? What is it you want?"

"I was waiting for you to ask," Kousaka said, facing him squarely. Yoshiyasu braced himself.

"Yo-you're not going to ask me to transfer Sendai's barrier to you, are you?"

"I'm not asking for anything so grandiose. It's a simple matter. I want information about those who are allied with Mogami. Especially—" Kousaka's eyes glinted "—information concerning Oda."

"!" Yoshiyasu recoiled. "Oda...!"

"Can you or can you not do it?"

"That's—"

For a moment he wavered in consternation. The matter of Oda was one

of

absolute secrecy for Mogami. If this leaking of information was discovered, Yoshiyasu would certainly not be allowed to get away with it.

"All right."

Kousaka chuckled.

"Provided that."

"?"

"You hear my request as well."

Yoshiyasu's tone was serious. Kousaka nodded firmly.

"Very well."

"I will pass information regarding Oda to you. And in return." The woman's eyes suddenly sharpened. "I would like you to deal with Uesugi's [kanshousha](#)."

For a moment Kousaka's expression was sincere.

But it immediately blurred, and he answered with a terribly cold smile, "Fine."

The stars slowly disappeared.

The sky began lightening to an indigo blue from the east.

Chapter 9: The Glass Lullaby

The

next morning, Takaya ate a hurried breakfast and then left the temple immediately to rendezvous with Ayako, who was on watch at the [Touhoku University site](#) .

They met up and went into a nearby coffee shop to hash out their strategy for the immediate future.

"This is a map of [Sendai City](#) ," Ayako said, spreading a large map on the table and picking up a pen. "The first site in Miya Town is here. The second in Teppou Town is here. Here are the third at the high school , the fourth at the highway in front of the tunnel , and the fifth at the [Touhoku University Agricultural Department](#) .

Looking at the numbered X's at those locations, Takaya exclaimed, "Huh so that's it. I can see the circle now."

"All the sites except for the first one lie perfectly on east, west, north, and south points from the city center. You can see it more clearly if I draw in lines like this—"

Taking a ruler, she drew a line between the second and fourth sites and another between the third and fifth.

"So the place where the lines intersect is the center of the barrier. Which means Hirose Avenue in the Ichiban neighborhood?"

"Yeah. Actually, try this compass."

He stretched the compass from the center to one of the X's and drew in the circle, and the five sites fell almost cleanly on its arc.

"So now we know that the 'platforms' were set on a circle with a radius of about 1.5 km. This is the size of the small barrier."

"I know that the foundation points are east, west, north, and south, but why is it that only the first site is north-east? What do you think it is?"

"It's probably controlling the 'demon gate'. Northeast is the unlucky direction. It's said to be the direction of bad omens which hinders Buddhist practice. Incidentally, if you look at this map, the reverse-demon gate point (southwest) falls right on [Aoba Castle](#)," Ayako answered, tracing the line. "Generally, you'd need foundation points in eight directions to establish a barrier, so I don't think this is over. I'm guessing that they'll capture three more points: southwest, southeast, and northwest. Because southwest is the reverse-demon gate, it'll probably be taken last. That leaves us with two other places. If we look at it like this..."

She drew in the southeast to northwest line she had pointed out and marked where they crossed the circle.

"I'm going to predict that the next attack will be around one of these two areas."

"One of these two'...hey, wait a minute!" Takaya leaned forward abruptly. "This southeast point... This...this line falls on the

Northeast Bullet Train overpass , doesn't it?!"

"Ye-yeeeeeah..."

"No way. Don't tell me that these guys would even blow up the bullet train tracks if we don't stop them."

"The map is approximate, so we can't say anything about the position for certain, but it really is suspiciously close."

"Hey, wouldn't this be really bad?"

If it were to happen just before a train passed through, a horrible disaster would ensue.

"It'd become Mothra's world."

"How is that supposed to be reassuring!"

BAM! Takaya's hands slammed down on the table.

"Gimme a freakin' break! I'll go if you won't go, dammit! I'll ambush those bastards and beat 'em down!"

"You're going to beat them down without even being able to use your <<powers>>? That's totally absurd."

"Yeah, but now that I know, it's not like I can just sit back and watch it happen!"

Thump—he jumped up, kicking the chair aside.

"Kagetora! Stop that! If you go as you are now, you'd just get beaten to a pulp. If anything happened to you, it wouldn't just be your

problem, you know!"

Takaya unexpectedly turned.

"Stop running out with your head on fire. Imagine how worried I am when you do that."

"..."

Takaya shut his mouth and quietly returned to his seat. Ayako took a deep breath.

"I've asked for backup from Nagahide."

"? From Chiaki?"

"Yeah. He should get to [Sendai](#) by tonight at the latest. I'll do my best until then. And I'm guessing

you just can't concentrate right now. There's a problem you have to resolve first, right?"

"Huh?"

"About your mother."

A frightening expression instantly entered Takaya's eyes. But Ayako said unflinchingly, "I feel sorry for her, after all the things you said to her. You do know, don't you? I think it must certainly have been more painful for your mother than you. She hasn't really forgiven herself. And besides, it was painful for you to say all those hurtful things, right? You should be able to talk it out together if you're honest with each other. It's not like you can't understand your mother,

right?"

"Shut up..."

"Nothing will be resolved in you if you run away. A few words from you will probably be enough to help her. You want to say those words, don't you? Please stop twisting everything and say what you mean. If you want to depend on someone, then it's fine to let yourself depend on them, so please be honest."

"I told you to shut up!" Takaya shouted at her as if in an attempt to shake off her words. "I can't do what you guys do; I can't atone by being the filial child!"

"!"

Struck by Takaya's words, Ayako glared coldly at him. Takaya stood from the table and left the coffee shop.

In the direction of the city covered by broken clouds—

Takaya walked alone, biting his lips.

Takaya returned to [Jikou Temple](#) sometime past noon.

He noticed the teacup used by guests as he entered the living room.

Kokuryou was nowhere to be seen, but Takaya could sense the faint remaining <<energy>> of the visitor, who must have left just a short while ago.

"..."

Takaya looked down wordlessly.

"Gramps..."

Beneath the persimmon trees in the garden, Kokuryou turned as Takaya called to him. He appeared to be in the middle of pruning.

"Ah. You're back."

"Yeah."

"Have you had lunch yet? If not, there should be some leftovers in the kitchen... Hmm?"

Kokuryou, noticing Takaya's intensely earnest gaze, took a second look at him. Takaya asked haltingly, "It looks like—my mom was here...wasn't she?"

"..."

"Did you call her here?"

Kokuryou didn't deny it; the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes simply deepened.

He walked over to the main temple building and took a seat on the veranda.

"Here, young monk."

"?"

"When were you born?"

Takaya blinked blankly.

"I...was..."

If he was [kanshousha](#) ,

it would mean that he had been born four hundred years ago. But that also meant that he had experienced the instant of his body's birth many times...

Looking at the silent Takaya, Kokuryou smiled easily.

"I am asking about you. When were you...when was Ougi Takaya born?"

"Ougi Takaya was—..."

Takaya choked on the words. What was Kokuryou asking?

Kokuryou narrowed his small eyes and looked up at the sky.

"People make many fresh starts in the course of their lives. So even if their bodies do not die, they can, if they wish, start over countless times."

"..."

"Could it be called a rebirth? If so, then you are born again at the moment you wish from your deepest heart to start over from the beginning."

Takaya lifted his head.

Kokuryou gently continued, "Long ago you must have thought thus. That you wanted everything to start over from the beginning. To begin again from nothing, to return to the pure white soul of a baby."

"..."

"Now, though you struggle to forgive, you cannot forgive, even if it had been for the sake of forgiving both yourself and others—"

Takaya's eyes widened. Kokuryou's words had touched him for the first time.

"Gramps..."

"You sought your mother's womb as your place of rebirth, did you not?"

You choose your mother's womb as the place of your new beginning, as a

place from which to make a fresh start, to turn everything back into a blank slate." Kokuryou met Takaya's eyes. "Your mother's womb was where

your soul was reborn. It was where your soul was born in order to make a fresh start; it is the home of your new beginning as Ougi Takaya."

Layered over Kokuryou's words was what Masamune had said to him:

"We begin our existence in our mothers' wombs. Our mothers are our home."

The one who had given him birth was his mother—his one and only mother.

His mother's womb was—the place where his life had begun.

Birth.

Which was.

The one instant he had—he, who was less than a speck of dust in the eyes of the world, who was less than even that in the eyes of history—

The one instant which he might engrave into that unduplicable history.

Yes—though a person could start over again countless times, Ougi Takaya

existed only here and now. He had 'Sawako', the mother who was no longer by his side, 'Miya', the sister he would protect, 'Yuzuru', his irreplaceable best friend; though he bared fangs wounded from battles with grown-ups, he could still form connections with many 'persons'—

He was not the same as any of those selves who had lived in the past.

And his future would probably be different as well.

The only self who existed here and now.

It was Sawako who had given him birth.

This person so precious to Ougi Takaya had given him the present. Had she not also given him each of the values that he held so dearly?

Kokuryou said, "She is the one who gave birth to the new you. Far from being a stranger to you, she is the mother of Ougi Takaya's soul."

Takaya stared at Kokuryou, startled. "Gra...mps..."

Kokuryou smiled faintly. "You have not deceived anyone. You have not betrayed anyone. You, who exist here and now, are liked by all, are important to all."

"..."

"There is nothing for you to feel guilty about. You are quite honorably that person's child. Please go see her just once. She seems very much worried about you."

Takaya stood motionless. The power to hold the loneliness in his heart at bay would instantly crumble if he made one false move.

Takaya looked down, hiding his expression.

He could make no reply.

(Mom—...)

It was not to be considered. It was self-evident. But—

He would never understand without thinking about it.

The problem was not the past, but the future. What should he do from here? What should he do so that he would not hurt those who were precious to him, so that he would not betray them?

Being Kagetora was not an acceptable excuse.

Why could he not be honest?

Why did he have to hurt someone who was so important to him?

If the answer was his weakness, then he wanted to become strong as soon

as he could. If the answer was his childishness, then he wanted to hurry up and become an adult. If he was hesitating, if he was hurting people over this, then he wanted...he wanted to grow up. —He wished for

that, so very much.

(I...) His shoulders shook with the weight of his thoughts. (I'm—just a kid after all.)

As Kokuryou watched over him, Takaya bit his lips. Harder and harder.

"You should just be yourself."

His mother, the mother who appeared in his mind, still called his name with a smile that embraced him.

He noticed it for the first time.

That the moss rose garden had never disappeared from his heart...

Kokuryou picked up the phone.

It was sometime past seven in the evening.

Takaya descended from the second floor, feeling a sense of foreboding at its ring.

"What?! Where are you? Where are you now?!"

Takaya immediately guessed from the change in Kokuryou's expression that something out of the ordinary had happened and took the receiver from him.

"Hello? It's me!"

"Ka-Kagetora...?!" It was Ayako who answered. "The sixth barrier point...was attacked!"

"The sixth? Not...the bullet train..."

"No, the opposite...northwest point. The hospital affiliated with Touhoku University in the Seiryu neighborhood . The building's destroyed...I can't..."

Ayako's agonized voice seemed about to fail altogether as the sounds of her breathing grew fainter and fainter.

"Nee-san ? Are you hurt?!"

"I'm...fine. I'm fine, but...nobody...nobody's doing anything..."

"Not doing anything? What do you mean!"

Ayako cried out with anguish, "Nobody's noticed the collapse! It's like they can't see anything! They're not reacting at all! They're not calling anybody! Not the police, not the fire department! Nobody's doing anything!"

"!"

"A lot of people have been affected...there are a lot of injured people! Everybody's suffering—what should I do, Kagetora! What should I do?!"

"They aren't...but...!"



"I've called again and again, but nobody's done anything! No one's come to help! I've called and pleaded, but nobody's reacting! A building's collapsed, but nobody's taking any notice! It's like their eyes are deflected away, and everybody's behaving as if nothing's happened! At this rate even the people who survived will die! Kagetora!"

Hypnotic suggestion.

Mogami's <<jike-kekkaai>>

was already beginning to take effect. Under the suggestion, people would neither question nor care about the supernatural phenomenon wrought by the onshou or take notice of the resulting victims.

"What should I do! I...ah...!"

"! Nee-san , you all right?"

"Ka-Kagetora...!"

"I'll go right now! I'm heading over there, so wait just a while longer, okay! Wait for me!"

He replaced the handset and turned to Kokuryou.

"Are you going?"

Takaya nodded.

"Even if I can't use <<power>>, I can't just stand around doing nothing, right?"

"... The divine protection of all the gods go with you. They will certainly protect you."

There was a smile in Takaya's eyes.

"Bishamonten will, right?"

In that moment.

Sssszzzz...

An eerie sound came from beneath the floor.

"What the!"

The earth rumbled. The house began to shake. The lights trembled violently. Flower vases fell. The entire house jolted and creaked in waves of growing shocks.

"An earthquake?!"

"!"

Suddenly a terrible howl came from the ground. An unimaginably immense

power enveloped the house. Cracks ran across the ceiling. Pillars snapped, and the ceiling collapsed unto walls unable to bear its weight.

"Wh...!"

The ground dropped out from beneath his feet.

In the next instant.

Crimson flames sprouted up in front of his eyes.

"!"

A thunderous roar shook the entire area.

Kokuryou's home exploded into a gigantic pillar of flame.

A young man stood nearby, his eyes reflecting the blaze that scorched the sky.

Kousaka Danjou Masanobu silently turned his face away as the wind fanned hot ashes against his white coat.

Jikou Temple crumbled away within the raging flames.

With his head quietly bowed—

Kousaka's lips curved into a slight, cold smile.

TO BE CONTINUED

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